Future focussed

Youth Work in Australia: Reflections and Aspirations
Youth Work in Australia: Reflections and Aspirations

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AYAC acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the elders both past and present.
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Foreword

Since its appointment as the peak body for the youth affairs sector at the national level, AYAC has been working hard to move from its establishment phase, to now being able to make a difference nationally on issues affecting young people and the youth sector. One of the key ways we can achieve this is through stimulating discussion on topics of importance to all of us.

One of the issues which continues to divide the sector is the question of what youth work is. This pilot report is one of the key starting points to kick off discussion and better inform the conversation about who we are as a youth sector, and importantly, where we want to go in the future.

AYAC is dedicated to engaging in an ongoing conversation with our members and the wider youth sector about the nature of youth work and sees this as a critical aspect of how we do what we do. It is vital that young people participate in these discussions as well.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of the Steering Committee who were involved in guiding this report. I know they gave freely of their time and expertise to participate in this process and their input has been invaluable. Also my personal thanks go to the AYAC staff who also worked hard on this report – and who I’m sure are looking forward to processing the responses.

Once again, I look forward to the ongoing debate and discussion about the issues identified in this paper, and the many other issues facing the Australian youth sector.

Peter Newling, Chair

Australian Youth Affairs Coalition
About the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia’s non-government youth affairs peak body, which seeks to represent young people aged 12-25 and the sector that supports them.

AYAC represents a growing membership of State and Territory youth peak bodies, national youth organisations, researchers, policy makers and young people themselves, who are all passionate about creating an Australian community that supports and promotes the positive development of young people.

**AYAC aims to:**

- Provide a body broadly representative of the issues and interests of young people and the youth affairs field in Australia

- Advocate for a united Australia which respects and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, promotes human rights, and provides justice for all

- Represent the rights and interests of young people in Australia, at both a national and international level

- Promote the elimination of poverty and to promote the wellbeing of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged

- Recognise the diversity of Australian society; to promote the cultural, social, economic, political, environmental and spiritual interests and participation of young people in all aspects of society

- Advocate for, assist with and support the development of policy positions on issues affecting young people and the youth affairs field, and to provide policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to governments and the broader community

- Facilitate coordination and cooperation within the youth affairs field

- **AYAC and its members are dedicated to working for and with young people and seek to ensure they have access to mechanisms, which allow them to make decisions about issues that affect them in the Australian community.**

More information about AYAC and our work can be found at [www.ayac.org.au](http://www.ayac.org.au)
Introduction

The youth sector in Australia enjoys a rich and complex workforce. Youth workers are employed in all states and territories, in urban areas and cities, as well as rural and remote areas. Youth workers engage with a diverse population and draw on many skills to do so. Some youth workers are paid, others are not; some are faith-based, others are not. Youth workers come from all walks of life and in that way, reflect the diverse population they work with. As such, there are some views and practices that are common to many youth workers and some that are not.

Clearly, these are significant issues and cannot all be addressed (nor answered) in this report. That is why AYAC has chosen to produce a pilot report. In this way, we can ‘test the waters’ and pave the way for future, more in depth investigations.

This pilot report marks the beginning of a unique opportunity for the youth sector nationally. The recent establishment of AYAC as a federal peak body allows such discussion to be conducted on a national scale for the first time in a decade. It asks difficult questions so that the sector may move a step closer towards common understandings. As such, the report should not be viewed as a definitive answer to the questions that have been posed. Rather, it is hoped that it will be viewed as the beginning of a conversation about youth work at a national level.

AYAC recognises that while many people working in the youth sector hold similar views, there is debate around key issues, such as professionalisation and codes of ethics, the quality and availability of education and training for youth workers, and what distinguishes youth workers from other occupations and professions that work with young people. AYAC also recognises that such debates are necessary and reflective of the passionate nature of many who work in the youth sector.

This report is both a reflection on the past, as well as an observation on the present...it aims to look to the future by capturing the views of key stakeholders within the youth sector: youth work practitioners, peak body representatives and academics working in the youth field.

It is in this spirit that AYAC urges all stakeholders in the youth sector to use this report as a catalyst for reflection and robust conversation. We hope that this report provides the sector with ideas, questions, and the beginnings of a framework with which to investigate more deeply the future paths of the youth sector and its workers in Australia.
Youth Work Around the World

‘Youth work’ conjures different meanings for individuals and groups around the world. Not only do people think differently about what youth work entails from country to country, differing views exist within countries. Although this is unsurprising, given the differences in cultures and values, one can see from the table below that there is, in fact, some common ground upon which we can build. The table below lists current policy and definitions of youth work that influence practice today and in so doing, provides a context for Australian readers to see how other countries approach youth work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Work Defined</th>
<th>Policy/Legislation</th>
<th>Key principles/Ideas</th>
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</table>
| **Europe**

Youth work is a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people. Increasingly, such activities include sports and services for young people. Youth work belongs to the area of ‘out-of-school’ education as well as specific leisure time activities, managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders and is based on non-formal learning processes and voluntary participation.

European Union Resolution: Council
Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting with the Council, on youth work

- Youth workers and young people should be involved in policy-making decisions
- Values of youth work are: rights-based, opportunity-focused with a positive orientation and based on equality of access and involvement
- It is increasingly expected to engage in far greater professional collaboration
- Classical evaluation tools need to be supplemented with the dissemination of good practice which can inspire others; there is a relatively thin knowledge base on youth work in Europe
- Youth workers need more advanced training
- Professionalism is deemed necessary but routes to individual validation through the accreditation of prior learning must be established and respected
- There is a strong need to develop a legal framework for youth work that ensures a core budget

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Youth Work Around the World

### Scotland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Work Defined</th>
<th>Policy/Legislation</th>
<th>Key principles/Ideas</th>
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| Youth work is an educational practice contributing to young people’s learning and development. Youth work engages with young people within their communities; it acknowledges the wider networks of peers, community and culture; it supports the young person to realise their potential and to address life’s challenges critically and creatively; it takes account of all strands of diversity. | Youthlink Scotland A Strategy for Improving Young People’s Chances Through Youth Work (2007) | • Young people choose to participate
• Young people must build from where they are
• Youth work recognises the young person and the youth worker as partners in a learning process
• Purpose of youth work:
  - Build self-esteem and self-confidence
  - Develop the ability to manage personal and social relationships
  - Create learning and develop new skills
  - Encourage positive group atmospheres
  - Build the capacity of young people to consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control
  - Develop a ‘world view’ which widens horizons and invites social commitment
• Age range = 11–25 years |

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ii Youthlink Scotland: The national agency for youth work – www.youthlinkscotland.org
# Youth Work Around the World

<table>
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<th>Youth Work Defined</th>
<th>Policy/Legislation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Republic of Ireland</td>
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</table>
| Youth work is a planned program of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary involvement, which is (a) complementary to their formal, academic and vocational education and training; and (b) provided primarily by voluntary organisations (Youth Work Act 2001). | National Youth Council of Ireland Youth Work Act 2001 National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work | Five core principles are identified in the NQSF:  
• Young person-centred: recognising the rights of young people and holding as central their active and voluntary participation  
• Committed to ensuring and promoting the safety and wellbeing of young people  
• Educational and developmental  
• Committed to ensuring and promoting equality and inclusiveness in all its dealings with young people and adults  
• Dedicated to the provision of quality youth work and committed to continuous improvement |

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iii National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) for Youth Work, Comhairle
## Youth Work Around the World

### Youth Work Defined

**England & Wales**

At its core, the aim of youth work is to support the personal and social development of young people through informal education. Its distinctive characteristics include the voluntary engagement of young people, young people’s active involvement in developing provision, the use of informal education as the primary method of youth engagement, and an approach to provision that is responsive to young people’s preferences.

### Policy/Legislation

- Dept of Education
- Statutory Guidance on Section 507B Education Act 1996 (published in March 2008)

This is the current situation in the UK, however the new government is in the process of making changes to youth policy.

### Key principles/Ideas

- Participating as active citizens in local democracy
- (Re)engaging in education and learning
- Making lives healthier
- Improving access to learning
- Strengthening information, advice and guidance
- Supporting partnership working
- Taking part in structured leisure time activities outside of the school environment
- Staying out of the youth justice system
- Playing an active part in local communities
- Youth work refers to working with young people in groups

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# Youth Work Around the World

## New Zealand

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<th>Youth Work Defined</th>
<th>Policy/Legislation</th>
<th>Key principles/Ideas</th>
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| A youth worker is one who works predominantly with young people between the ages of 12 and 25 to coordinate services and provide opportunities to enhance young people’s ability to reach their full potential and; one who regards youth work as their primary occupation. | Ministry of Youth Development  
Youth Development Strategy  
Youth Development Best Practice  
Code of Ethics for Youth Work in Aotearoa New Zealand | • New Zealand has a government-endorsed Code of Ethics  
• Youth development is shaped by the 'big picture'  
• Youth development is about young people being connected  
• Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach  
• Youth development happens through quality relationships  
• Youth development is triggered when young people fully participate  
• Youth development needs good information |

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Youth Work Around the World

<table>
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<th>Youth Work Defined</th>
<th>Policy/Legislation</th>
<th>Key principles/Ideas</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>South Africa</strong> vi</td>
<td>National Youth Commission (Govt of the Rep of South Africa, Office of the Deputy President)</td>
<td>Child and youth care:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child and youth care is work with children and youth, as whole persons, in order to promote their social competence and healthy development, by participating in and using their day-to-day environments and life experiences, and through the development of therapeutic relationships.</td>
<td>National Youth Policy 1997</td>
<td>• Is primarily focused on the growth and development of children and youth</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Is concerned with the totality of a child’s functioning</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Has developed a model of social competence rather than a pathology-based orientation to child development</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Is based on (but not restricted to) direct, day to day work with children and youth in their environment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Involves the development of therapeutic relationships with children, their families and other informal and formal helpers</td>
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In contrast to many of the countries identified in the table above, Australia as a nation does not have a statutory ‘youth service’. In many cases, youth work has been associated with elements of service delivery from different government departments or supported through other levels of government. In this social and structural context, the emerging conversations about purpose, philosophy and the common understandings to support effective practice are vital.

vi Mark Anglin J 2001 ‘Child and youth care: A unique profession’, Reading for Child and Youth Care Workers, 35:Dec
Youth Work in Australia – A History

Why examine the history of youth work in Australia? For one, we cannot escape our own history and reflective practice necessarily involves a searching of our own past. More importantly, we can learn from our history, gain a deeper understanding of our origins and forge pathways for youth work to follow; not one based on re-inventing any wheels, but one based on lessons learned and insights gained. This is why it is important and valuable to reflect on history.

This brief history is presented chronologically: The development of youth work in Australia has been strongly influenced by values, from the earliest faith based interventions through to the social justice focus of the 1960s and 70s. Early forms of youth work were located within religious and philanthropic activity and it was not until well into the 20th century that it became subject to regular government intervention (Bessant 1997). The youth work of the mid-nineteenth century can be characterised as being associated with an ‘enlightened’ (wealthy) few, who wished to ‘rescue children from a life of idleness or immorality or poverty’ (Bessant 1997, p.394). This reflects similar trends internationally in regard to work with particular classes of young people. In the United Kingdom for example, it was believed at this time that many working class young people lacked the necessary respect and morals and therefore required intervention (Rose 1997).

Much youth work was faith based, often sponsored by Christian groups with evangelical purposes. Similar to the United Kingdom, many of the earliest Australian youth interventions came from faith-based organisations, including Sunday Schools. For example, the Australian branch of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) was founded in Adelaide in 1851, joined shortly afterwards by the Young Women’s Christian Association (YMCA), both of which aimed to promote Christian values and integrity (Massey 1950)¹. Additionally, Anglicare was established in 1857 (Anglicare Australia 2008) and the Salvation Army, also operating within a Christian framework, opened its doors in the early 1880s (The Salvation Army 2011). Further, the Try Society was founded in the 1880s and was based on the belief that ‘the model of a rural Christian family was a solution to [the] urban social problem [of larrikinism]’ (Maunders 1990, p.174).

In contrast to the religious motivations of earlier youth work, the next wave came with the establishment of settlement houses in the late 1880s and was again based on British models. The idea for settlement houses essentially grew from a reformist socialist movement, in which the goal was to have the rich and poor living alongside each other in an independent community. The first settlement house was established in Sydney in 1891 and still exists today (The Settlement Neighbourhood Centre 2006) and indeed the movement still continues internationally.

Another shift was the emergence in the early part of the twentieth century of organisations such as the Boy Scouts, the Girl Guides and the Boys’ Brigade, which began to form spontaneously across the country in line with the movements worldwide. These organisations still exist (and thrive) today and, Bessant argues, ‘provide certain styles of youth work practice’ (1997 p.394). The continuation of youth work as a values based practice continued into the early part of the twentieth century. The establishment of the Young Communist League, and later the

¹ Note that the YMCA and YWCA, while still faith-based organisations, do not place the same level of emphasis on religion today.
Eureka Youth League in 1941, saw the development of secular youth work practice with strong ties to social justice themes, primarily at a time when the working conditions of young people in Australia were being called into question (Maunders 1990).

This development of a left wing political focus continued on through the ‘New Left’ protest movements of the 1960s and 70s. Irving et al. (1995) argue that particularly through student protests in universities, both the greater community and government were forced to pay attention to the views of young people around issues such as ending the Vietnam War and conscription, reforming educational institutions and opposing racism. It was through this period that a number of school and university participatory mechanisms such as Student Representative Councils were developed. This new youth work method of empowering young people through their participation was a popular focus of youth work from this time onwards, with services being designed to build the skills of young people to assist them in making their own decisions (Bessant 1997). Until the early 1970s, the majority of organised youth work was contained within the non-government community sector. However, it was at this time that governments became more involved in the youth sector as a primary funding source (Maunders 1990).

The rise of full time and paid youth work in the middle to late 20th century saw the development of formal training courses and professional associations in some states. These developments coincided with the parallel rise in formal state based youth councils, NGO networks and government advisory bodies (Irving et al. 1995). It could be argued generally that the rise in paid youth work has led to the diverging of voluntary youth work into a parallel but separate stream within the youth sector. The youth policies of Australian governments have profoundly affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their families, including the Stolen Generation. As such, Watkinson and Bessant (2000) argue that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities remain suspicious of non-Aboriginal youth workers and policy makers due to the historical brutality engendered by government policies related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is important to note that the literature review undertaken for this report failed to address the negative impact of youth work and youth workers on the Stolen Generation. While this is not a part of youth work history to be proud of, it cannot be ignored within the context of discussing the history of youth work in Australia. As with all countries, youth work in Australia is embedded within the culture, thinking and values of the times. From faith-based, philanthropic and political motivations, to government-sponsored approaches, youth work has had a long and complex evolution. This varied history underpins present day Australian youth work. It is argued here that youth work and youth workers have responded to the social context of their time. Different eras brought changes in the way youth work has been delivered and perceived, and still influences some of the debates within the youth sector today.
Youth Work in Australia Today

Australia is a federated nation of self-governing states and territories, each also adhering to commonwealth laws. As a result, professional and/or occupational regulation may differ from state to state. As well as state/territory delineation, there is also a very real difference between the urban cities of Australia and its rural and remote areas, both of which present unique issues for any occupation. Youth work is one such occupation.

As noted earlier, there is much common ground within youth work policy and practice around the world, and this is certainly the case in Australia. However, there is also some disagreement in certain quarters of the youth sector, such as whether or not the occupation of youth work should professionalise, the number, location, quality and type of youth work training courses available across the country, and whether there should be a nationally ratified code of ethics and practice standards. The debate in Australia surrounding these issues is rigorous.

This report is intended to promote discussion. As such, it will not try to solve each of the issues mentioned above (see ‘Moving Forward’ on page 36 for further information). However, what it can do is look at some of Australia’s leading thinkers and their ideas and commentary on youth work; in particular, what a definition of youth work might look like. It will also look briefly at the concept of professionalisation, as it is one of the more pressing issues for youth workers in Australia today.

Although there is much agreement on what it is that youth workers do, Australia does not presently have a nationally, fully agreed definition of youth work. There is no one definition used by all youth workers and peak bodies. White (1991) believes that the issue of defining youth work lies partly with its historical development, along with an ‘apparent reluctance of many practitioners... because doing so inherently limits or restricts who is or is not seen to be involved with youth work (p.7).’ Sercombe (2010) agrees but believes that the key obstacle has been that commentators have tried to find an ‘embracing’ definition of youth work. He argues, ‘It isn’t difficult to talk about what youth workers do...the difficulty is to say what makes youth work distinctive’ (p.25).
Nevertheless, both White and Sercombe attempt a definition. White believes that the basis for a definition of youth work ‘should be summarised in terms of the age and circumstance of the target population; the “welfare” context and orientation of youth work practice; and the development of a shared identity via the emergence and consolidation of relevant training, industrial and academic bodies in the youth affairs field’ (p.11). Sercombe defines it thus: ‘Youth work is a professional relationship in which the young person is engaged as the primary client in their social context.’

Clearly, it would be useful for the sector as a whole to agree on what makes youth work distinctive from that of other occupations and professions that work with young people. The following ‘Results’ section (page 20) attempts to address this question via a survey questionnaire, which asked participants: ‘What is different about the youth work approach from other disciplines or professions that work with young people?’.

Finding what distinguishes youth work from other professions may hold the key to a common definition. At the very least, it is hoped that the responses will prompt a national discussion and serve as a starting point for deciding on a nationally accepted definition of youth work in Australia.

Any discussion of youth work in Australia during the twenty-first century must also consider the idea of professionalisation. There is significant debate - both for and against - as to whether or not youth work is or should become a profession.

Bessant (2004) is in favour of professionalisation, believing in ‘a single national statutory body with the authority to require qualified professionals to register before they [youth workers] are to build a professional identity and status, and if public trust is to be developed.’ (p.19). Sercombe (2004) agrees: ‘Youth workers continue to be marginalised in professional terms, in professional consultations, or case management panels because their professional standing is not recognised by other professionals. Their knowledge and experience is frequently dismissed, limiting their capacity to advocate effectively for their clients (p.21)’

Cooper (2011) is more emphatic in her argument for professionalisation, stating that ‘youth work will not survive as a distinctive form of practice unless we professionalise.’ Corney and Hoiles (2006) also argue for professionalisation, however their call is motivated by the safety of both young people and workers. They argue that with the recent enactment of specific legislation relating to the safety of children and young people in many states (Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, the Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005, and the Working With Children Act 2005),
there is now new legislative impetus to look again at the practice of youth work. They also argue that the appointment in various states of Child Safety Commissioners and their recent public challenges to the youth sector to rethink the issues of safety and protection of both young people and those that work with them (Geary 2006; in Corney & Hoiles 2006), has reopened the debates associated with professional practice and codes of ethics for youth work across Australia.

Cooper (2011) also outlines some objections to professionalisation in the literature. She cites Illich et al. (1977), who argues that professionals potentially disable their clients by acting for them (i.e. disempower them). Cooper also cites elitism and the stifling of innovation as key objections to professionalisation within the sector. In contrast, Corney et al. (2009) argue that recent attempts at professionalising the youth sector have focused only on ‘codes of ethics’ and left pay and conditions issues to one side. They argue for the benefits of combining professional aspirations with industrial organisations claiming that joining the professionalisation agenda to that of trade unions can only strengthen the collective voice of youth workers and the quality of service provision to young people.

The debate surrounding key issues in Australian youth work will no doubt continue for some time. However it is important to engage in discussion to clarify and articulate what Australian youth workers do and how they do it, so that the benefits to both young people and youth workers are maximised.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

Introduction

This report has been designed to begin a conversation across Australia’s youth sector. The youth sector in Australia is at a crossroads. Some of the key questions include: how might the Australian youth sector conceptualise contemporary youth work?; to professionalise or not?; to increase and enhance the quality of our training courses, or make the decision to have youth work taught under the aegis of other social sciences? The operative phrase here, of course, is ‘make the decision’ because the Australian youth sector must be proactive and decide how to collectively move forward.

This is the first pilot study on youth work to be undertaken by a federal peak body in Australia for many years. It is a pilot for a specific reason: youth work in Australia is taken seriously by the AYAC and it recognises the need for further, more extensive, investigation following on from this pilot. For this reason, AYAC decided to ‘test the waters’. It needed to run a pilot survey to see if it was, in fact, asking the right questions. You will see from the ‘limitations’ section that there are indeed questions and methods that will need further examination before embarking on further, full-scale research.

With this in mind, we outline the methods, limitations, results, and suggestions for the next steps below.

Method

It was decided to adopt a mixed method approach to the collection of data, to achieve a rich and varied assessment of both the current state of play in, and the future hopes of, the youth work sector in Australia. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can deepen the understanding of attitudes, process and motives [Stenius 2008]. Furthermore, the strategic selection of key people within the Australian youth sector enabled a varied and more reflective response on behalf of the sector as a whole. Because of this, with the assistance of the Steering Committee and the Chairperson of AYAC, we engaged those who work with young people, as well as peak body representatives and academics from each state and territory in Australia.

This report has been designed to begin a conversation across Australia’s youth sector.

A survey was drafted and circulated among the Steering Committee and then developed and disseminated to the selected participants via Survey Monkey, an online survey and data collection tool. The survey remained open for two weeks and all respondents were anonymous.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

Sample

The Steering Committee decided that, given the time frame of this report, the best way to gather data was via a direct approach to key practitioners, peak body representatives and academics. Each member of the Committee was asked to supply a list of such names. However, as not all states and territories were represented on the Committee, AYAC also contacted relevant peak bodies in unrepresented states and territories and asked them to supply a list of key contacts (in the same categories). The survey was emailed to contacts received by AYAC (n=73). The response rate was 89.2%.

Limitations

The first limitation of this survey was the high number of respondents from South Australia (because of a misunderstanding of instructions about the survey distribution), which may have skewed the results. Nonetheless, we have attempted to mitigate this through cross-tabulation, so that some results can be analysed on a state-by-state basis.

Two of the questions relating to education (whether or not respondents felt there were enough TAFE and/or university youth work-specific qualifications) were removed during analysis. This was due to the scope of the current report (as this will be investigated on a wider level during the next investigation). However, data has been retained for future use if necessary.

A particular anomaly was also found in the survey results, in that three of the respondents from Queensland identified themselves as peak body representatives. This may be due to a number of factors, for example, those respondents may have an association with The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ) and therefore have identified themselves as such. While in itself this is not problematic, it must be noted that YANQ chose not to be officially involved in this survey.

Other limitations in this pilot study included:

- An omission of ‘diploma’ in the level of qualifications question;
- An omission of a question asking respondents to elaborate on why they did not think the youth sector should professionalise (although it should be noted that some answered this question anyway); and
- Of those respondents who identified as a practitioner (53%), their training or otherwise as a ‘youth worker’ was not known.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

Results

Number of respondents (n) = 66

Which State/Territory are you from?

As noted in 'Limitations', above, South Australians represented the largest percentage of respondents at 42%, placing SA way above the next highest state (Victoria) by 20%. This appears to have occurred because some of the participants forwarded the survey link, counter to instructions.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

Respondent type - National

- **PEAK REPRESENTATIVE**: 18%
- **ACADEMIC**: 30%
- **PRACTITIONER**: 52%

Respondent type - By state

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Territory</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Practitioner</th>
<th>Peak Representative</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
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Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

How would you describe youth work?

“Youth work is both relational and purposeful. It is a helping profession that serves the whole community by particularly valuing the contribution to society of young people and promoting that. It helps make space within our society for young people to be who they are and to be understood and supported in terms of what is actually happening for them. It helps society become more aware of its structural and generational prejudices against young people and to explore better ways of support and inclusion. From a young person’s perspective, youth workers are safe people who engage with them in ways and means that make sense. They form relationships with young people that assist their growth into adulthood whilst skilfully maintaining clear professional boundaries and utilising effective coaching and counselling skills in seamless ways. They [youth workers] often look as if they are just ‘hanging out’, which they are, but in the very best of ways they are also ‘loitering with intent’.”

Many answered this question in a lengthy fashion. The quote highlighted above captured the sentiment of most of the respondents. Looking closely at the responses, the thematic content was divided into:

✶ The philosophy of youth work

✶ What youth work is – particularly what its key ‘trademarks’ are

✶ The purpose of youth work

✶ The tools used by youth workers

The philosophy of youth work

The most common theme that emerged throughout the responses was that of the young person as the primary client. That is, youth work is young person-focussed. The other key theme was that youth workers view young people in context; young people are not free floating atoms unattached to others or the norms and values of society, they are embedded in it. Youth workers are highly attuned to the fact that many young people have distinct and important relationships (whether or not these are ‘functional’) not only within their families but also with their peers, authority figures (such as teachers) and society in general.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

Towards trademarks of youth work

Again, a common theme recurred in this section: youth work is about relationships. As summed up by one respondent, youth workers ‘form relationships with young people…whilst specifically maintaining clear, professional boundaries’. Another said ‘youth work is uniquely positioned in the framework of “relationship” and attempts to reduce power imbalance due to age without breaking ethical boundaries’. Other themes emerging from responses included the concept of youth work as a ‘professional practice’ and youth work as one that is undertaken on a voluntary basis.

The purpose of youth work

Perhaps the best recount of the purpose, or reason for youth work is the following: “[Youth workers] assist, support and empower young people to increase or restore resilience, increase or restore positive community…to increase or restore, and support young people’s self identity and self esteem. I hope this is open ended enough to encompass not only youth work that seeks to support vulnerable young people though difficult and adverse situations…but also youth work that seeks to maximise achievements and further empower young people who are already engaged and participating in their communities”.

🌟 The most commonly listed ‘purposes’ of youth work are listed below:

🌟 To empower the young person

🌟 To support the young person

🌟 To encourage the young person’s full participation in society

🌟 To help young people increase their agency and wellbeing

🌟 To learn about themselves, others and society

🌟 To engage with young people (on the same level, whatever that level might be)

🌟 To be primarily concerned with the rights and needs of young people
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

The tools of the trade

Youth workers, academics and peak body representatives alike listed the following tools with which to achieve the above ‘purpose’ of youth work (in order from highest to lowest):

★ Advocacy (this was by far the most common response)

★ Informal programs (education and otherwise) and activities

★ Informal counselling

★ Role modelling

★ Mentoring

★ Case management

★ Providing opportunities

★ Informal coaching

What is different about the youth work approach from other disciplines or professions that work with young people?

“There are no other disciplines that engage the young person in their social context and for whom the young person is the primary client: i.e. for whom it is unethical to act against the interests of young people. Social work engages the service user in their social context, but the interests of the service user must be balanced against other interests, including the interest of the state. Psychology and medicine (should) hold the young person as the primary client, but the sphere of engagement is the body or the psyche, not the social context. Similar remarks could be made with respect to police, teachers, counsellors, sports coaches: either the young person is not the primary client, or the sphere of action is not the social.”

Overwhelmingly, respondents used the words ‘primary client’ to distinguish youth work from other professions (as demonstrated above). Time and again, answers began with variants of ‘youth workers view the young person as the primary client’.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

Other key themes emerging from the survey that respondents cited as delineating youth work from other disciplines included:

🌟 The development of a voluntary relationship: ‘Lots of people work with young people, but youth workers’ core business is in the building of the relationship. In this voluntary relationship the youth worker is different to other people who work with young people because the roles and methods are different.’

🌟 Youth work is done ‘with’, not ‘for’: ‘Young people control the engagement and the youth workers work from a basis of equality. Youth work shares information and power’.

🌟 An assumption on the competencies and strengths of young people: ‘Other professions problematise young people as either dangerous or incompetent and in need of control. Youth work assumes that young people are competent and able to act on their own interests. Youth workers...have a better capacity to engage young people in transformative work than any other profession’.

🌟 Process and Participation: ‘Youth work is charged with hearing young people’s voices (as opposed to “in the best interests”, which often is an adult view laid over the voice of the young person) and acting to amplify what young people are saying. Youth work is less concerned with expecting young people to meet social norms and more with raising awareness of the possibilities present now’.

Interestingly, a few respondents (4) believed that there was ‘nothing really’ to distinguish youth work from that of other professions. One respondent wrote: ‘At this point, there is little to distinguish youth work from those of flanking occupations such as social work or community work.’ The respondent continues: ‘This question can be divisive when talking to the broader sector, and can challenge people to choose a definition that may exclude them’.

One respondent stated that youth work is ‘not skilled from a particular discipline base’.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

What minimum level qualification should be required for youth work?

The two most common responses to this question were 'Certificate 4' and 'Undergraduate Degree'. This was followed by 'None' (approximately 18%), Post Graduate Degree and lastly Certificate 3.

What do you believe is the current perception of youth work in Australia today?

This response section is best represented by quotes, as the statements were rich and varied, perhaps a reflection of the youth sector itself. Before quotes are listed, however, it is interesting to note the number of times certain words were used. ‘Misunderstood’ and ‘lesser professionals’ were the most common words and themes arising from this question, followed very closely by ‘under valued’.

‘There needs to be a definition of youth work so that it can be articulated nationally for the unique and different role that youth workers play.’

‘Many youth workers believe they’re providing a unique service – but generally they can’t define their values or model of practice and most seem unaware of the similarity between their practice and that of most community workers.’

‘I think there is a perception that all youth work happens at the crisis end of service provision. I have also spoken to young people who associate the word ‘youth’ with church groups’.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

‘Most people wouldn’t have a coherent perception [and] would see youth work as a subset of social work or human services.’

‘As always – a job that is used to keep young people off the streets.’

‘A bunch of under-trained, under-qualified, uninspiring and unfocused workers sitting around in youth centres.’

‘The sector has some PR issues, in terms of selling itself as the highly qualified and dedicated workforce it is (can be), and youth centres in particular still face the negative “just playing pool” cliché.’

‘It is often confused because we haven’t contested the space enough. We have allowed disciplines such as social work and psychology to leak into the space with consistent suggestions that they can do the same work. Patchy training opportunities, a sector that still thinks that there is a place for untrained workers – or barely trained – will suffer the grave consequences unless it takes on the professionalism debate.’

‘[The youth sector] has not been good at articulating what it does...and a cynical eye finds it easy to focus on the practices, which are often trivial (playing pool and horse riding), rather than the practice, which can be deeply transformative.’

‘Sadly I think it is the cigarette smoking, denim wearing, ’school of hard knocks’ older bloke who plays pool with street kids. This really worries me.’

‘I don’t think we highly value youth work. I have a Masters Degree, yet when I say I am a youth worker, I can tell that people don’t really think [of it] as a profession, or me as a professional in that role.’
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

Do you believe youth work in Australia should be professionalised?

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Close to 71% of respondents indicated that they wanted the youth sector to head down the path of professionalisation. However, as noted above, it is important to view these quantitative responses in context with the qualitative replies discussed below. 29% did not believe in professionalisation and some expressed concern that they were not given the opportunity to explain why they took this position. Again, many respondents did address the anti-professionalisation argument in the qualitative responses below.

**State/Territory Breakdown**

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Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

If yes [youth work should be professionalised], what should it look like?

The overwhelming themes that emerged from the data were: the need for a state and/or national based professional association, along with a code of ethics, and a more regulated education system (both in terms of better quality education for youth workers and a recognition of minimum standards of qualifications).

Other issues raised included the need for:

- A nationally agreed definition of what youth work is;
- A solid philosophy of youth work, along with a strong evidence base for its practice;
- Better standards and best practice guidelines; and
- Respect for other, commensurate, qualifications and youth work experience (with particular reference to professional association membership) – otherwise known as ‘grandfather clauses’ or ‘sunset clauses’.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

The general consensus was that having these in place would increase quality assurance, increase the status of the profession and ensure the safety of the young people with whom the youth sector work.

It should be noted here that some respondents suggested that there was an omission, in that respondents who ticked ‘no’ (i.e. that youth work should not be professionalised) were not given the opportunity to explain why. However, six respondents mentioned this and went on to elaborate, so we have some information from which to draw regarding the opposition of professionalisation. The following are two such examples:

‘This is a very biased question. What about “If no, why not?” “Professionalisation” should not be confused with “professionalism”. Professionalisation is primarily concerned with protecting the status and interests of an elite social group – and has historically served to place further distance between professionals and their “clients”. There is no evidence that professionalisation has improved the quality of service or ethics of members or professions. On the other hand, professionalism is concerned with providing the highest quality of service, delivered in a thoughtful, ethical manner – and should be the goal of any worker with young people.’

‘I said no because I don’t think professionalisation has improved the quality of social workers or psychologists who work with young people. Part of youth work remains outside the respectability of the professions...I don’t think it would improve the quality of youth work.’ To ensure impartiality, the following quotes arguing for professionalisation are included:

“Professionalisation” should not be confused with “professionalism”. Professionalisation is primarily concerned with protecting the status and interests of an elite social group.

‘A profession. Seriously: a collective (albeit critical) commitment to core discourses, expressed in codes of ethics and other key documents. That collective expressed in and supported by organisation. That organisation consulted in such a way, and powerful and resourced enough, to be able to protect the profession [not, note, its members] and to lobby on its behalf’.

‘The orthodox standards will have to prevail – we need a code of ethics, a professional association, a minimum qualification standard and industrial action for pay and conditions. Purists will detest the above but we won’t be considered by the broader community as a profession without these and if we don’t professionalise youth work will have proven to be a passing fad rather than a developing occupation”.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

What do you believe youth work in Australia should look like in ten years?

’Youth work will be a discipline for the whole youth demographic as well as continuing its particular expertise in working with the poorest of the poor. Each state and territory will have its own professional association of youth workers or a state branch of the national organisation. The professional associations will be supported by youth work-specific conferences and other professional development events as well as robust tertiary training opportunities at both undergraduate and graduate levels. TAFE are still players in the field but in dialogue and partnership with the higher education sector. Youth workers will be players at the table in terms of multi/trans disciplinary dialogues at both micro and macro levels. Our poets, prophets and dreamers will still be amongst us perpetually charming and challenging us to reflect on what we really stand for and to think about where we want to go. They will hate some of what we have become and they will annoy the crap out of us at times, but we need them.’

The opening quote above sums up the general feeling of the responses to this question. The most common word in all of the responses was ‘articulated’. Youth practitioners, academics and youth sector representatives alike all stressed the need for youth work to have a commonly agreed definition of what youth work is and what distinguishes it from other professions. For example, one respondent wrote: ‘An identifiable and self-conscious body of workers who understand and articulate about what it is that they do’. From another: ‘[Youth work will be] clearly articulated to see greater understanding and recognition of its uniqueness amongst the broader community and other professionals.’

We need a code of ethics, a professional association, a minimum qualification standard and industrial action for pay and conditions.

The second most common theme was education; more importantly, high quality, accessible, appropriate and accredited education. Commensurate with education/qualifications was ‘skills’, which was often used alongside education.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

It is almost impossible to disentangle the issues of education, ethics and professionalisation. These topics were listed interchangeably in most of the responses. Less commonly, yet still (perhaps) aligned with professionalisation were responses such as youth workers wishing to be ‘more valued’ and to have a ‘higher status in their community’. Respect was also a common theme, as was a desire for the youth workers’ communities to have a better understanding of what their role is. Also tied in with professionalism are professional associations, codes of ethics and more appropriate remuneration for youth workers. Some of these themes are highlighted in especially salient quotes below:

Youth work should be recognised and valued more than it is in the community.

‘The sector should be well qualified, with a series of strong state and national professional associations. There should be a rich body of knowledge developed through research and practitioners reflecting on and writing about their work. Decent wages and working conditions. University programs should be accredited. Youth work should be recognised and valued more than it is in the community.’
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

‘A body of aspirational (and inspirational) trained professionals who have the importance of their role understood and valued by the wider community. Every young person would want to seek out a youth worker to walk with them through their adolescence, and these youth workers would be available and capable of doing so. Amazing!’

‘Professionalised. Well trained. Distinct position and award roles that specify must have a youth work degree-strong, postgraduate sector or we will be out of business all together and will be glorified gate keepers and monitors.’

Other themes emerging included: a strengths-based approach to young people, youth workers working in a range of settings (including schools), a multi-sectorial approach to working with young people, the important ability to measure and demonstrate the successes of youth work, and a well-resourced sector that is less political.

Lastly a critical theme: rural and remote youth work: ‘[There will be a] more generous spread of youth workers geographically [and we will] explore ways to ensure youth workers in rural/remote/aboriginal communities work to up skill people in the communities themselves to be able to take on those roles.’
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

Moving Forward

It is clear from the responses to the survey that there are common themes emerging from the sector: people want a clear and articulated expression of what it is they actually do, so that both they and the community with which they work more fully understand the occupation. Many want to see the occupation professionalised and there is some common ground as to how that might look like. Overwhelmingly, respondents wanted to see youth work valued.

As this pilot report is only the first step towards a more unified sector, AYAC envisions a number of ways in which we can move forward. These include:

A broader investigation: As this report, a pilot project, attracted such strong responses from the sector, we recommend that a more extensive investigation be conducted. This investigation could increase the number of participants, should address and rectify the limitations noted earlier, and could potentially use the material gathered in the pilot to inform more in-depth questions on specific points raised by respondents.

Defining youth work: We have studied the literature and presented varying definitions of youth work, as well as the theories underpinning these. Additionally, we have captured much common ground (both through the literature review and via the survey) in what makes youth work distinctive. This could be used as a catalyst for exploring a common Australian definition, shared by the sector and its youth workers on a national level. Most importantly, we should include the opinions of young people in working on this definition.

Mapping education: It is clear that there is concern in the sector about the number and quality of youth work-specific education in Australia. This should be investigated on a national scale.

A question of ethics: AYAC has already begun to conduct a national debate on adopting (or not) a national code of ethics and will draft a report for dissemination in late 2011. To participate in the discussion, go to AYAC’s website: www.ayac.org.au. Please note that this debate will close in August 2011, however, the discussion will be kept online.

Professionalisation: Perhaps one of the most contentious of issues in Australia is the idea of making youth work a profession. If we are to professionalise, what will that look like? How will it be funded and resourced? Who will be eligible and what training will be necessary? If we don’t professionalise, what are the consequences? AYAC recommends that this issue is further investigated.

Rural and remote Australia: We need to recognise that this is a pressing issue in Australia, particularly for youth workers. AYAC recommends an investigation on the impact of youth workers in rural and remote areas and how we can better equip youth workers to engage with young people. AYAC will collaborate with state and territory peak bodies to investigate ways in which we can better resource and equip youth workers in rural and remote areas of Australia.
Aspirations For Youth Work in Australia

References


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Maunders D 1990 ‘Youth work as a response to social values’, Youth Studies Australia, 9:2 (173-187).


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Appendix 1: Research Project - Aspirational Survey

1. Are you an academic/practitioner/peak representative? (Closed)

2. Which state/territory are you from? (Closed)

3. How would you describe youth work? (Open)

4. What is different about the youth work approach from other disciplines or professions that work with young people? (Open)

5. If no, where and at which level do you believe there should be more youth work specific courses? (Open)

6. What minimum level of qualification should be required for youth work from Cert 3 – Post Graduate - none? (Closed)

7. Why? (Open)

8. What do you believe is the current perception of youth work in Australia today? (Open)

9. Do you believe youth work in Australia should be professionalised? Yes or No. (Closed)

10. If yes, what should it look like? (Open)

11. What do you believe youth work should look like in Australia in 10 years? (Open)

12. Any further comments? (Open)