A shared understanding of rights-based youth engagement?

A conversation starter on challenges and opportunities

By Dr Dean Farquhar and Nellie Wotherspoon

ayac. Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

About AYAC

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

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

Report authors:

Dr Dean Farquhar, National Youth Engagement Lead, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

Nellie Wotherspoon, National Policy Officer, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

Authorised by: Joanna Rostami, CEO, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

Contact: info@ayac.org.au

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We would further like to offer a pre-emptive apology that we were not able to quote more of what you shared with us for reasons of space. It was a great learning opportunity to hear all your perspectives.

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.

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Key points for reflection

It is common for some key findings to be presented at the beginning of a report such as this. However, it felt wrong to do so on this occasion. As the report is intended to be a conversation starter, it felt more appropriate to offer some points for reflection arising from the research to orient future discussions. The key points for reflection, as we see it, are:

Rights-based youth engagement is a reason-giving practice.
It requires explicit reasoning about which rights are being advanced and how.

A more shared understanding does not require uniformity.
Progress towards rights-based youth engagement instead requires transparency and openness to negotiating difference within the terms and provisions of human rights frameworks. It does not require that everyone agree on all things.

Knowledge gaps about rights matter – but deficit framings do not help.
The challenge is not young people's lack of interest in rights, but how knowledge about rights and pathways for claiming them is diffused, contextualised, and made meaningful.

Thin rights-based approaches risk weakening both practice and policy.
Invoking the language of rights without a clear account of how specific rights are advanced through particular engagement techniques and policy proposals can limit the depth, credibility, and impact of the work.

Interpretive tensions are unavoidable and should be surfaced rather than suppressed.
Tensions around safety and autonomy, child and parent/carer rights, open and targeted engagement, and minimalist versus maximalist approaches are not failures – they are sites for deliberation that ensure meaningful reflection on what is in the best interest of young people.

There is some agreement between young people and adults.
Despite different vantage points, young people and those who work with them share common expectations around dignity, respect, transparency, and meaningful influence.

Tokenism is a real risk – but fear of it should never justify inaction.
Engagement that is imperfect but reflective, responsive, and transparent may still offer value and can build momentum towards more meaningful participation over time.

Rights-based engagement requires evidence of power shifting.
Demonstrating how young people have shaped agendas, processes and decisions is central to assessing whether engagement has moved beyond tokenism.

Language matters – be practical and accessible.
Human rights frameworks gain traction when they are translated into everyday practice in accessible language.

A more shared understanding emerges through thoughtful practice and the exchange of ideas.
Rights-based youth engagement is strengthened through ongoing reflection, feedback, and learning – by young people, practitioners, and decision-makers alike.

Introduction

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Australian government has a responsibility to ensure that all young people[1] are empowered to claim their rights. Optimising the government's capacity to meet this responsibility requires that key stakeholders work towards a vision of rights-based youth engagement that enables co-ordinated, meaningful work with young people. Yet evidence persists that rights-based frameworks for working with young people remain misunderstood and contested (54 Reasons, 2024). This report examines the prospects for strengthening a more shared understanding of rights-based youth engagement among young people and those that work to support them in claiming their rights. This provides insights into how a more co-ordinated approach to engaging young people as rights holders might be cultivated.

The report begins by establishing some of the building blocks for undertaking rights-based youth engagement. Attention then turns to some challenges to realising a more shared approach to such work. This establishes a series of themes that guide an analysis of the narrative evidence collected through the research. This evidence includes findings from:

- A consultation with 12 young people from across Australia.
- 12 semi-structured interviews with professionals that work with young people across Australia.
- A national youth roundtable addressing the theme of the urgency of rights-based youth engagement, inclusive of young people, youth practitioners, academics and others working in the youth policy space.

It is recognised that this evidence is not representative of all young people or those who work with them. This is not our intention in this report. Rather, our intention is to provide insights into possible misunderstandings and points of contestation between relevant stakeholders and how these might be overcome. This opens up avenues for further exploration, discussion and reflection on how certain nuances and tensions might be negotiated to better co-ordinate and advance the work. In short, the report is a conversation starter.

[1] Consistent with the general use of the term in Australia, young people are taken to be those aged 12-25 (see Australian Government Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021). It is recognized that those over 18 are covered by other human rights frameworks.

The building blocks of rights-based youth engagement

What are the building blocks of a rights-based approach to youth engagement? This question must be answered if we are even to begin thinking through what a more shared understanding of this work might look like. Let's start with some basic points that hopefully will not prove too contentious.

To be considered a rights-based approach, those participating in the work must at least make a claim that young people have rights and that these are being protected or advanced through the engagement process. When making this claim, there is no guarantee that they will cite the same rights, pursue uniform approaches or offer complementary rationales. A whole host of youth engagement projects and initiatives may seek to lay claim to a rights-based approach. What unites these projects and initiatives is how they draw on common sources of justification for their work.

In this report, the following sources of justification are taken to be the building blocks of a rights-based approach to youth engagement:

1. United Nations frameworks that provide the basis for international human rights standards, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
2. Domestic legislation that enshrines certain protections, entitlements and obligations.
3. Professional codes of ethical practice that set out guiding principles for working with young people as rights holders.

A rights-based approach to youth engagement requires that at least one source of justification be cited.

What complicates matters is how the sources of justification outlined above are in a dynamic, interdependent relationship with each other – sometimes complementing each other, sometimes forming points of tension. For example, domestic legislation may be thought to be complementing or frustrating the commitments set out in United Nations frameworks and professional codes of ethical practice. Similarly, professional codes of ethical practice may be argued to be inadequate to realising and advancing the obligations outlined in United Nations frameworks and domestic legislation. In addition, guidance offered by United Nations agencies and youth sector bodies may be seen to conflict with the democratic mandate of domestic political institutions.

Further complicating matters, the precise meaning of aspects of each building block may be interpreted differently by different people. There are challenges associated with attempts to develop a shared understanding among relevant stakeholders around how these building blocks might be assembled to best co-ordinate approaches and empower young people as rights holders. Let's think through some of these challenges more thoroughly.

Challenges to a shared understanding of rights-based youth engagement

This section sets out 3 challenges to cultivating a more shared understanding of rights-based youth engagement. Challenge 1 examines the impact of possible knowledge deficits concerning rights among young people and relevant stakeholders. Challenge 2 works through the implications of contested framings of rights-based approaches. Challenge 3 unpacks the implications of the charge of non-participation. Taken collectively, these challenges cover quite a broad spectrum of thinking on rights.

Challenge 1 – Knowledge of rights-based approaches to youth engagement

Putting a rights-based approach into motion requires a basic level of understanding among those involved in the engagement process about what rights young people may lay claim to. It further requires that young people are made aware of their status as rights holders and are adequately encouraged and resourced to claim those rights.

Although somewhat dated, the Australian Human Rights Commission's finding in 2015 that 60 per cent of young Australians were unaware that they have special rights, suggests that more might need to be done to embed young people's understanding of their rights. Enhancing this argument, recent ACARA test scores indicate that young people lack technical knowledge around civic and political engagement that might empower them as rights holders (Duffy, 2025) However, this need not lead us to a deficit-based account of young people's understanding of their rights and readiness for democratic participation.

A wealth of research shows that young people are interested in a range of political issues, and points to their engagement in a variety of formal and informal political practices (Collin & McCormack, 2020; Fu et al., 2021; Collin, 2025; Walsh et al., 2025). This research further acknowledges that owing to the differing composition of young people's political interests, some might require more support to connect with those more formal modes of engagement to enhance their capacity to claim their rights (Ghazarian et al., 2020; Farquhar, 2024; Farquhar et al., 2025).

It might therefore be argued that the key issue where young people are concerned is not their lack of interest in their rights, but how to most effectively diffuse knowledge about those rights and the modes of engagement through which they can be advanced and made real for each young person.

Questions must also be asked whether youth practitioners and decision-makers genuinely understand the implications of the rights guaranteed to young people. There is a strong commitment to rights-based approaches in the youth sector, as evidenced by the central role afforded to such approaches in the national definition of youth work (AYAC, 2013). However, concerns remain around the variability of practitioners' technical and practical knowledge.

Corney et al. (2021, p.14) note that despite the foundational significance often afforded to rights-based approaches in the youth sector, a lack of understanding of key United Nations frameworks and how these relate to reputable models of participation and engagement techniques can be 'an inhibitor and barrier' to empowering young people as rights-holders. Developing this point, Broadbent (2021) points to the need for youth practitioners to seek out opportunities for continuous professional development and reflective practice to integrate lived and learnt experiences in such a way as to enable them to best support young people through the engagement process.

Without adequate professional development and reflective practice, there is a risk that youth practitioners deploy what Farthing (2012) refers to as *thin rights-based approaches*. While making claims around the rights of young people, such approaches fail to provide a sophisticated understanding of what these rights are and the mechanics through which they are being realised and advanced. This risks the quality and depth of the engagement process, and limits youth practitioners' capacity to communicate impactful work with young people.

The issue where youth practitioners are concerned can be thought to be ensuring the spread and transfer of practical and technical forms of knowledge across the youth sector conducive to emboldening young people as rights holders acting on the matters that affect them.

Finally, there is a risk that key decision-makers may lack knowledge about their responsibilities to young people as rights-holders. Lundy (2012) cites a growing interest in rights-based youth engagement among decision-makers, with progress evidenced through more responsive forms of monitoring and evaluation by states. Yet, as Lundy and colleagues point out, there are often disconnects between rhetoric on rights, decision-making processes, and inconsistent policy development and delivery (also see Forde et al., 2020; Templeton et al., 2023).

It might therefore be argued that the issues where decision-makers are concerned relate to furthering consistent and robust rights-based decision-making and policymaking. More on this below in the section on non-participation.

Challenge 2 – Contested framings of rights-based approaches

It has long been acknowledged that rights-based approaches are contested and open to interpretation (UNDG, 2003). This reflects the political salience of rights in how we seek to order our societies. If healthy democracies permit pluralism and dissent, it should not be surprising that the interpretation of rights and their translation into practice forms the basis of disagreement.

Acknowledging conflicting interpretations of human rights frameworks, UN agencies published a statement in 2003 outlining the following series of principles to move towards a more shared understanding around deploying rights-based approaches:

- ***Universality and inalienability:*** Human rights belong to every person everywhere, simply because they are human. They cannot be surrendered, traded, or legitimately taken away by others.
- ***Indivisibility:*** All human rights are equally important and inseparable. Civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights all carry the same weight and must be respected together, not prioritised or ranked.
- ***Inter-dependence and inter-relatedness:*** Human rights are connected and mutually reinforcing. The fulfilment of one right often depends on the fulfilment of others, meaning progress or failure in one area affects others.
- ***Equality and non-discrimination:*** Every person has the same human rights and dignity. No one may be excluded or treated unfairly in the enjoyment of these rights on any prohibited ground, such as race, gender, age, disability, or belief.
- ***Participation and inclusion:*** All people have the right to actively and meaningfully participate in decisions and processes that affect their lives and development, and to benefit from the outcomes of those processes.

- ***Accountability and rule of law:*** Governments and other duty-bearers must uphold human rights under the law. When they fail to do so, individuals have the right to seek remedies through fair and lawful institutions

These basic principles offer a non-hierarchical, universal view of rights that emphasises a holistic and participative perspective on working towards the realisation of the rights of all. Although establishing a basis for a more shared understanding, determining what the principles should mean in practice can still give rise to conflicting interpretations.

This report identifies 4 interpretative tensions in relation to rights-based approaches to youth engagement:

1. ***Safety/Autonomy:*** As rights holders young people have the right to safety, security and protection from a variety of harms. In addition, there is an expectation that as rights holders they will be afforded autonomy to form their own views and have these given due weight on matters affecting them in accordance with their age and perceived maturity. This raises possible tensions between efforts to keep young people safe from harms, and those aimed at maximising their autonomy. These tensions can be managed, and indeed safeguarding practices may be experienced as empowering by young people by giving them safe spaces to flourish. However, it is important to keep in mind how a duty of care always limits the autonomy that can be afforded to young people involved in an engagement process, and that how these limits are specified may need to be explained to young people. What is in the best interest of the young person may require reason-giving, negotiation and reflection on how to best align approaches with human rights frameworks, especially in cases concerning young people under 18.

2. ***Parent & carer rights/Child rights:*** The rights of parents and carers to have a say over the lives of the young person in their care are enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet, as alluded to above, this coexists with the expectation that as rights holders young people will be encouraged to form their own views and have these given due weight on matters affecting them in accordance with their age and perceived maturity. This raises possible tensions arising out of conflicting views among parents, carers, practitioners and young people around what is in the best interest of the young person. Again, discerning the best interest of a young person may require reason-giving, negotiation and reflection on how to best align approaches with human rights frameworks, especially when the young person is under 18.

3. ***Open Access/Targeted:*** The right to equal treatment may be perceived by some to sit uneasily alongside additional efforts to level the playing field to ensure that young people from marginalised backgrounds are given adequate opportunities to participate. While this is not the view of the authors, there is potential tension around the balance between open access and targeted forms of youth engagement that is perhaps worth teasing out. Open access engagement is most often thought to comprise place-based youth projects and initiatives that are open to all young people in the local community. These have been shown to bring a range of benefits to young people, such as improved confidence, social connectedness, skills and feeling heard (see de St Croix & Doherty, 2023; 2024). From the personal experience of the authors, they also provide opportunities for long-term relationship building that gives young people added confidence to participate in consultation and decision-making processes on their terms and in their spaces. On the other hand, it is also our experience that targeted

engagement helps ensure a greater diversity of representation by requiring that those with certain lived experiences are included in the project or initiative from the outset, which pushes back against the sidelining of underrepresented voices. However, it is also our experience that targeted forms of engagement are often aligned to more formal Youth Advisory Group models that are not always appropriate for some young people. The potential tension here, as we see it, is not about choosing between open access and targeted engagement, it is about making sure there is an appropriate balance between the two to optimise the opportunities available to young people in a context of finite funding.[2] The appeal of reason-giving and reflection on how to most effectively deliver rights-based youth engagement is again present.

4. ***Minimalism/Maximalism:*** Human rights commitments, such as those pertaining to education, are to be realised progressively. This permits tensions between those who advocate for more minimalist measures to realise and advance rights, and those who take maximalist positions that seek more comprehensive measures. It should also be noted that the determination of what constitutes minimalist and maximalist positions in this regard can also be contested. This is not necessarily a weakness of rights-based approaches, so long as it is acknowledged that the building blocks alluded to above can function as tools for negotiating differences in perspectives through reflective and open dialogue on the compatibility of competing positions with human rights frameworks.

These tensions recur in various forms within the discourse concerning rights-based youth engagement (see Jeffs & Smith, 2008; Farthing, 2012; Bhabha, 2014; Forde et al., 2020; 54 Reasons, 2024).

While it may be tempting for some to dismiss the positing of the possible tensions in points 1 and 2 as a form of 'adultism' whereby the competencies and expertise of young people are systematically undervalued in relation to those of adults – this is arguably too simplistic a view. Those working with young people must meet very real safeguarding requirements through their work, which can impose limitations on the engagement process and the autonomy afforded to young people. Moreover, the engagement process can be enriched when those working with young people develop support-enhancing relationships with parents and carers. There are occasions when the concerns of parents and carers can be integrated in ways that strengthen the work.

In relation to the possible tensions outlined in points 1 and 2, it is perhaps more useful to broaden the antidote to 'adultism' proposed by Corney et al. (2022) by stressing agreement with the proposition that the role for those working with young people is not simply to 'get out of the way', but it must be to partner with them and those comprising their support networks in a reflective and improvised way so that the engagement is contextualised to meet the specific needs of each young person. What bounds this process of deliberation is the requirement that the reasons underpinning decisions are grounded in human rights principles concerning dignity, autonomy and safety, and that the rule of law ensures legal recourse can be sought when human rights are transgressed. The reason-giving must be aligned with ethical standards and legal norms – it is not free-floating and boundless.

[2] This report is not about the challenges and opportunities regarding the funding of rights- based youth engagement, it is about how we might move towards a more shared understanding of what should be funded and encouraged. This point has been included as it speaks to the need to consider what types of work might need to be funded. The adequacy of current funding streams is beyond the scope of the report.

The possible tensions detailed in points 3 and 4, on the other hand, are byproducts of the democratic pluralism that human rights frameworks seek to advance and protect in a context where inequalities prevail. As alluded to above, if healthy democratic societies seek to enable the free expression of ideas and embed the right to participate in decision-making processes among all, it is to be expected that there will be differences of opinion around how this is best achieved, as well as how rights should be practiced and advanced, given varying lived experiences, needs and aspirations.

It might therefore be suggested that building up a more shared conception of rights-based youth engagement requires a commitment to open dialogue that permits the negotiation of difference through reason-giving and democratic debate centred on aligning approaches with human rights frameworks. Drawing on Habermas (1996, p.306), it can be argued that rights-based approaches require a commitment to the pursuit of 'the unforced force of the better argument' in decision-making, as well as attempts to counter how the unequal distribution of power might distort such efforts. Again, rights-based approaches to youth engagement must be improvised and contextualised by the marshalling of reasons to support its practice and claims, with this process bounded by legal recourse when human rights are transgressed.

Challenge 3 – The charge of non-participation

The charge of non-participation is commonly associated with Hart's (1992) ladder of youth participation. Hart's ladder charts an 8-step transition from degrees of non-participation to participation. According to Hart, non-participation encompasses:

1. ***Manipulation:*** When young people do not understand the issues motivating the engagement or their role in a process aimed at advancing the cause of an adult.
2. ***Decoration:*** When young people are positioned to advance the optics of the cause of an adult that they may have an affinity with but have been provided with limited information about and little scope to shape the terms of their engagement.
3. ***Tokenism:*** When young people appear to be given the opportunity to shape the terms of their engagement, but in fact have limited opportunities to choose how they participate and to what end.

For Hart, participation involves:

4. ***Assigned but informed:*** When young people are informed about the issues and why they are being engaged. They are also allocated specific roles by adults.
5. ***Consulted and informed:*** When young people are informed about the issues and offered an opportunity to shape the terms of their engagement. Adults will provide feedback on how the advice offered to young people was incorporated.
6. ***Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people:*** When adults initiate contact with young people but share decisions with them on the terms of the engagement process.
7. ***Young people-Initiated and directed:*** When young people initiate a project or initiative and primarily direct the engagement process, with adults only involved in a supportive role.
8. ***Young people-initiated and shared decisions with adults:*** When young people initiate the project or initiative but share decisions with adults on the terms of the engagement process. An exchange of experiences and expertise takes place.

Hart's ladder of participation usefully centres concern around what meaningful engagement might mean.

However, Hart's ladder has been criticised for its linearity, which it is suggested does not adequately represent how the differing needs and aspirations of young people incentivise diverging participatory habits and appraisals of what effective engagement looks like among young people (see McCready & Dilworth, 2014; Farquhar & McKenna, 2024). These critics suggest contextualising the determination of meaningful engagement by more closely attending to young people's subjective experiences of how the engagement process relates to discernible outcomes and milestones.

It is also important that fears about non-participation are set in proportion by those seeking to engage young people as rights holders. Lundy (2018) identifies how prevalent fears around tokenism have proved counterproductive by lending credence to the view that it might be better to do nothing at all than engage young people in a tokenistic project or initiative. This perspective is justified by arguments that tokenistic engagement disempowers young people by increasing feelings of disaffection and disillusionment. Lundy suggests that these fears may be somewhat overblown and can be set in proportion by maintaining open channels of dialogue with young people and being responsive to their feedback.

As Lundy points out, youth engagement will never be a perfect process. There will always be more that could be done to broaden and deepen the work. However, it is always better to make a start. The evidence gathered by Lundy further suggests that young people get more out of certain forms of engagement than is sometimes thought by youth practitioners and decision-makers.

Drawing on Gallagher's (2008, p.404) observations regarding 'the messy, fraught and ambiguous process" of engaging young people, Lundy presents evidence that indicates that forms of engagement that might be classed as tokenistic are not inevitably negative. The young people involved in Lundy's study expressed that experiences of tokenism can galvanise commitment to the pursuit of more meaningful engagement, as well as lead to disempowerment and disillusionment. These young people further cited additional benefits to their engagement, such as increased confidence, knowledge, social connection and life skills.

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to explain why those additional benefits are not sufficient in themselves to push the forms of engagement alluded to beyond tokenism. If young people are growing in confidence, learning new things, enhancing their connectedness to others and developing skills – how can this ever be tokenism? This is a good question that gets to the heart of what distinguishes a rights-based approach.

Here, Farthing's (2007) account of the subtle differences between rights-based approaches and health and wellbeing approaches to youth engagement is useful. Farthing explains that health and wellbeing approaches tend to offer instrumental rationales for youth engagement, such as improving emotional resilience among young people and building better project and policy outcomes. While rights-based approaches are by no means contrary to these laudable aims, Farthing (2007, p. 24) argues, they require a 'slight conceptual shift' that displaces the importance placed on instrumental benefits through an emphasis on young people's right to have their voices given due weight on the decisions that affect them, regardless of other benefits that might accrue from the engagement process. This discourages the view that maximising young people's autonomy to shape how they engage and the decisions made about them are added extras or luxuries.

Rights-based approaches do not depend solely on the additional benefits to engagement outlined in Lundy's study, but they do seek to articulate these within a framework that prioritises the exploration and evidencing of how young people have been afforded autonomy to shape the terms of their engagement and the decisions that affect them.

Facing down the charge of tokenism requires evidencing how the balance of power has been shifted in young people's favour, including where and how they have been able to shape the terms of their engagement and the decisions that affect them. Following Lundy (2007), it can be argued that this requires ongoing reflection on whether:

- Spaces have been established that enable young people to feel safe, confident and able to express themselves freely.
- Adequate information and support have been provided to young people to meaningfully voice opinions. They are also made aware that they can opt out of the process at any time should they feel like it.
- Views expressed by young people are directed to those in positions of authority that have the capability to make decisions.
- Those in positions of authority adequately consider the perspectives of young people and provide feedback on how this was achieved and to what end.

As meaningful reflection on these matters cannot be achieved without being receptive and responsive to the views of young people, it might further be suggested that overcoming the charge of tokenism can be enhanced by actioning the advice offered by Lundy (2018):

1. ***Seek full feedback:*** Make sure that young people can provide substantive and detailed feedback on their experiences. Let them discuss:
    - What they enjoyed.
    - Whether they learnt anything.
    - What would they change.
    - What happens next.
2. ***Be accessible:*** Ensure that the feedback process is carried out using accessible language that young people can understand. This includes providing youth-friendly versions of information and modes of engagement.[3]
3. ***Follow up:*** Progress updates for young people should be a regular part of the engagement process. Young people should know what becomes of the ideas and contributions they share.
4. ***Be fast:*** Make sure that progress updates for young people are done in a timely fashion. Decision-making processes may be slow but young people can be kept in the loop about how far along a process is.

Non-participation is a challenge to rights-based approaches to youth engagement but by no means an insurmountable one.

The more evidence that can be marshalled to show that young people's experiences and perspectives have been sought, considered and incorporated, the stronger the grounds for challenging the charge of tokenism. Likewise, the more evidence there is of power being shifted to young people where possible, the stronger those grounds become. Let's start examining the perspectives of participants.

[3] As this report is on young people aged 12-25, I have changed the Friendly (Child) category to Accessible as this is more appropriate for the target demographic.

Examining the perspectives of young people and those who work with them

This section examines the perspectives of participants on rights-based youth engagement. While using the set of challenges noted above as a framing device, it does not rigidly follow each theme sequentially. To provide some flexibility so the analysis reflects the ebbs and flows of the discussions that were had with participants, it follows a looser structure that allows for certain digressions that help capture the range of views expressed.

The young people that participated in the consultation noted that they did not believe they had been adequately educated on their rights, with some suggesting that adults tend to focus more on young people's responsibilities:

"You don't always get told or educated about rights."

"I can't think of a situation where I was taught about rights."

"I kind of feel you get taught a lot about what your responsibilities are going to be as an adult, but not necessarily about your rights... Like we're taught about what our responsibilities are as citizens and about maintaining the law, but not necessarily about what we should be expecting [as rights holders]."

"I would say that I didn't learn about the rights of the child until I went to TAFE."

Providing robust education around rights was perceived by some consultation participants to be especially important owing to a sense that rights can be taken for granted by some in Australia:

"For me, living in Australia and the life I've had, I've been able to go to school, I work, and like when you think about it, there's a lot of young people in other parts of the world who, like, don't have that at all. So, to me, it's kind of, you know, I've been going through life not really thinking about my rights because they've kind of been a given and like they're not something that, you know, I've had to fight super hard for. So yeah, that's kind of like an important part of the conversation, I think, recognising privilege and yeah, thinking about how important human rights are for young people."

Consultation participants nonetheless had developed an understanding of their rights. There was also a reasonable degree of consistency in how they spoke about those rights. Participants tended to believe that rights uphold human dignity, safeguard free expression, and promote mutual respect and social justice:

"To me, I guess it [having rights] just means to feel free and heard, and like to be treated fairly and to be accepted for who you are... Because we're all human beings, we're all different, I know, but that shouldn't matter. Like you should just be treated fairly no matter who you are or what age you are."

"For me, everything's about respect. So, it's about treating people the way you want to be treated."

"It's about things like the right to education, the right to health, the right to express opinions – freedom."

Although not expressed in such terms, we see how some of the key principles of rights-based approaches identified by UN agencies align with how participants related to their rights. The importance of universality, equality, participation and the interlinked nature of rights is apparent in their contributions.

Consistent with wider literature, those participating in the consultation identified a wide range of political issues that they would like to see action taken on. These included climate change and disaster mitigation; preventing violence against women and girls; rural inclusion and service access; education quality and accessibility; employment; cost of living; housing access; and young civic and political participation. Moreover, as the following contribution on strengthening youth civic and political engagement suggests, they often combined passion with proposals when speaking about the issues they care about:

"Have better civics education in schools... The education system can incorporate something about being more engaged in the community. That way we could improve motivation and civic engagement, which would help to empower young people."

The variety of issues addressed further challenges simplistic readings of youth political interest that hint at uniformity in youth interests and priorities. What the issues that affect young people are and how they prioritise these should be opened up to exploration through dialogue to gain a better insight into what they want the engagement process to look like.

Those working with young people to support them in claiming their rights offered similarly positive views of the rights afforded to young people The importance of Convention on the Rights of the Child was stressed by interviewees:

"My understanding is it [rights-based youth engagement] is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. So, we'll look at those basic human rights but tailored towards young people. So, specific things around their identity and right to be heard, you know, to have their voices amplified on things that directly impact them, those sorts of things... From memory, there's quite a few articles, and I can't remember all of them off the top of my head, obviously, but yeah... I guess like that sort of goes hand in hand with youth work because you're working towards the best interest of the young person or the child. And without their voice, you're kind of just working towards your own agenda when it really needs to be youth-focused and person-centred and I think that rights-based approach puts that at the forefront."
- Alcohol and Other Drugs Youth Worker

The embeddedness of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in ethical codes of professional practice and its relation to domestic law was also raised:

"The one that we would most commonly use is the code of ethical practice for the Victorian youth sector. Just because it references a range of other documents and puts them into context, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international but also national documents." **- Rural Youth Worker**

"I guess the rights we come back to are the human rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The other major one we look at is the Child and Youth Safe Organisations Framework in Tasmania. We focus on their right to participate in decision-making... We always try to follow Articles 12 and 13." **- Youth Peak Project Manager**

Acknowledging the rights of those young people over 18, interviewees further stressed the importance of taking an encompassing view of rights when engaging young people:

"I start with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, I also use a broader human rights frame understanding that young people includes people beyond the age of 18... The child rights framework is a human rights framework and, all the human rights that are generally available should also be available to children and young people. That's my grounding for how I approach policy development and practice." **- Youth Policy Consultant**

However, some participants identified a need for further training around human rights frameworks to support them in pushing beyond the *thin approaches* alluded to above:

"I will be very upfront and say that the language of like youth-based rights is not something I'm super familiar with. The concepts more generally yes. But like what does that language actually even refer? I know it's embedded in the UN policies around like rights of children and things like that." **- Worker at an Economics Think Tank**

A need for training to ensure the diffusion of knowledge among all those working with young people was thought important by several interviewees. Reflecting the concerns around language set out above, some interviewees stressed the need to ensure training pushes beyond the formal, legal language often associated with human rights to support those working with young people link human rights frameworks more directly to their everyday practices:

"In Australia we don't always feel comfortable with the language of child's rights. It's not something that seems to roll off the tongue easily... And not having a language, we don't have a mental model for understanding the human rights lens and knowing what to do with it in a practical sense... There is a task collectively for all of us to make those connections between rights and everyday issues all of the time, because those connections are not always being made - they're not automatic...

Through my work, I began to realise that a rights-based approach actually gave me a whole lot of new channels to engage on the issues that I'd been fighting on forever... But at the start of my career, I hadn't been really well educated on rights. So, I think there is an opportunity here for the education of the non-government organisations, as well as those working in government about the pragmatic usefulness of a rights-based lens." **- Former National Children's Commissioner**

Similar points were raised by Howard Choo from 54 Reasons at AYAC's national roundtable on the urgency of rights-based youth engagement:

"I think for us, when we want to communicate influentially with other people, and to do that in a way that brings people along on the journey with us, then it's really important to be thinking about our language and how we approach that. So, I think that in this forum, we're speaking very explicitly about children's rights and the rights of young people. We should not be afraid to use that language when speaking externally as well, but we should be thoughtful about when we're

using that language… I think what's important is to really come back to the animating ideas underneath this, which is that ultimately, human rights, including the rights of children, really express these convictions and promises that we all hold about the type of society that we should live in, where everyone is bound together, everyone has rights, but then there's a reciprocity there as well… So, often it comes down to the evidence around effective communication and understanding the mindset that people hold…

All of this, I think, is practice and professional knowledge that probably most of us have just absorbed naturally by seeing what works, that it works to speak in a strengths-based way, and to be collective, and to recognise that we're all in this together, and that there are solutions that are collective as well, and to avoid this thing where a finger is being pointed, even implicitly, at a young person or their family or their community or the culture or background that they may be part of or share in."

This push for a more shared, accessible and everyday language around human rights frameworks raises the question around the impact that some of the interpretative tensions outlined above might have on such efforts.

Interestingly, the young people that participated in the consultation spent little time dwelling on the possible tensions alluded to above in Challenge 2. This was not necessarily reflective of their ignorance of these tensions. Rather, it more so reflected that these were seen as more peripheral when compared with the benefits of rights-based youth engagement. Consultation participants stressed the potential of human rights frameworks to bring young people together and give them the safe spaces and power they need to shape the agenda:

"If you can express your ideas together, you can form new ideas and that can create an opportunity to develop… When you can share your ideas, you can bring people together."

"I guess it means to free but to also stay civil… Like it can help us work together and not against each other… So, like everyone can coexist."

"I think it's important [to focus on rights] because it feels like adults are making decisions on behalf of the youth, so I think we need to work out a way to build trust between the older demographic and young Australians. I think this would make us all feel safe and empower us to grow and speak up about issues. When we feel like we're being heard, whether that's on a global level or in our state or federal parliament, I think it gives us more hope that we can have a say."

As will be shown below, this commitment to the potential of human rights frameworks sat alongside a very clear, shared understanding of what effective youth engagement looks like.

Those working with young people exhibited a much greater sensitivity to the interpretive tensions alluded to above. This is perhaps not entirely surprising as they are often designing projects and initiatives that seek to prevent these tensions disrupting engagement with young people and leading to misunderstandings with decision-makers.

Interviewee's showed sensitivity to the need to balance safety concerns with a commitment to maximising young people's autonomy. The following contribution usefully demonstrates how possible tensions around safety and autonomy can be negotiated and reconciled by workers and young people:

"I work with a lot of vulnerable young people... I think the easiest thing to do is to let young people know that when we're talking about rights and advocacy that they don't have to talk to anyone they don't want to... But also, that their safety is paramount... So that's why there is an extra step in my work to go through organisations who are safe, and those organisations are mostly Aboriginal controlled organisations, with Aboriginal boards, with culturally safe practices...

I work with a group of young women who have been affected by domestic and family violence... Together we've actually, well mostly them, created engagement guidelines for the way they want to be engaged with in a culturally safe way if you're going to do a consultation."
- Social Services Worker

They further recognised the need to negotiate dynamic, nuanced relationships between young people and their parent/carer to optimise engagement:

"Probably the most complicated thing with children and young people is parents. Like when you talk about rights, it's not even just the systems, it's parents. Like how does autonomy fit in... And in Australia, we have a very clear concept of children being the responsibility of their parents... We're constantly trying to wrestle with who's responsible, how are we understanding both sets of rights. So, the Conventions of the Rights of the Child does bring some really complex conversations when you bring parents into the mix."
- Youth Development Specialist

Moreover, while the importance of ensuring the representation of marginalised young people through targeted youth engagement was consistently recognised, interviewees also talked about the importance of place-based open access engagement:

"I just think about the ways that young people in working class communities have never been engaged with...The way that people who are already marginalised in our community are not engaged with, I view it as an ongoing form of oppression...

We're making it even harder to do this work in the future. The very best way to know what young people's perspectives are is in the context of existing well-resourced groups. Often where they have a pre-existing relationship with a youth worker and they have those sustained relationships with each other where they have been able to do that kind of conscientization work where they can make sense of their own experiences... So, it's in that kind of community context where young people already are... We need to fund the development of that kind of relational community-based, place-based youth work." **- Academic**

"One of the issues with just using a Youth Advisory Group model is that it's only looking at participation in in one way. And that if we're considering: how are we meeting young people where they're at? You need multiple options. And if you're looking at participation as a right, it's important to have multiple ways for young people to share their views... It could be, you know doing engagements with like established clubs or groups or even services to collect feedback from young people. And it might just be a passing along a comment or a sentence or something or other all the way up to those very formal established reference groups or advisory groups. There needs to be multiple steps. Just limiting it to 1 model ends up being very challenging because it then gets a lot of criticism because it's like that's the only thing you're doing."
- Youth Participation and Development Officer

Perhaps most interesting was the degree of consensus among those interviewed on how to manage possible tensions arising from minimalist/maximalist positions on the implementation of rights and their translation into practice.

"It comes back to this idea that human rights provides a framework, and it should be a practical framework so that the process of working through the tensions is actually what it's all about.

***We need to shift the thinking that human rights are a stick that is used to bash people and to prevent them doing things. It should be empowering to use a rights-based approach because it gives you a range of tools that enables you to steer that course between the different principles and understandings."* - Youth Policy Consultant**

***"I think a rights-based approach gives a level of objectivity. In the policy advocacy space, everyone's reframing everything and anyone can call for anything. You know, it's politics, right? But having a child rights framework is an objective sort of touchpoint in that this isn't just our organisation calling for this. This is something that the world has acknowledged - that children ought to have rights. You don't have to be the person constantly arguing that children have the right to life; children have the right to privacy etc. You don't have to start from ground zero all the time because it's already been acknowledged by this sort of global consensus... You know, countries have all gotten together and acknowledged that this is the starting point... So, a rights-based approach is a common ground to start from and an objective touchpoint. I think that it's a good place to start at."* - Worker at a Digital Think Tank**

This position was endorsed and elaborated on by Professor Amanda Third at AYAC's national roundtable:

"Rights are often thought of as abstract legal principles, but actually they come to life at that level of the lived experience of the of the living, breathing child, the child who works their way through various challenges and opportunities. And I think what we know from implementing a rights-based approach is that you do have to take a careful approach. You have to remember that children are incredibly diverse...

In terms of handling some of those tensions, I think often what we do when we come to a challenge facing children and young people is that we want to find simple solutions...The kinds of challenges that children face as they grow are constantly evolving, and what a rights-based approach encourages us to do is to actually take a hold of the different contradictions that shape children's lives and to navigate our ways through that in an iterative and an ongoing way, so the

work is never complete, and the and a rights-based approach sort of provides you with a bit of a compass to manoeuvre through that child's environment and make decisions that are going to best support them, whether that's an individual child or a child or children as a collective...

In terms of that balancing, I think what we need to remember is that is that children's rights are what we call indivisible rights. They have to all be advanced together. There is no hierarchy of rights... The reality is that we must advance all of those rights alongside one another. We must make our best effort to ensure that we are making progress on all of children's rights simultaneously."

These contributions speak to the expertise and sensitivity to which those working with young people approach their work. They also contextualise the positions they adopted regarding to non-participation.

The young people that took part in the consultation were critical of what they believed to be tokenistic and unambitious projects and initiatives:

"Well, if we're thinking about whether adults consider the opinions of young people, it certainly depends on where you go... For every person and organisation who values young people, there's also those who don't."

"I think a lot of organisations and governments take our perspectives out of context just to feed their own stances and beliefs."

"It felt like they only wanted the people that already fit the narrative they wanted. So, it's kind of like, why did you sort of waste the time of five to six young people if you already wanted to go with a certain narrative?"

"I feel like there's too many consultations happening when there's an opportunity for co-design work right then and there. So, having more co-design work would be something, I guess, young people would look at as being taken seriously."

When asked what more meaningful participation looks like to them, they identified the importance of creating safe, respectful spaces where they can express themselves freely and feel heard. Informal, interactive engagement methodologies were also thought important to enabling young people to engage with programs on their terms:

"Just having this type of active participation, you know, like having a conversation where it's like we're free to say what we believe and there's no like right or wrong in it, like it's just what we feel about everyday life."

"Like some youth organisations and government when they do things, it's very structured and it's very, I guess, it doesn't accommodate what the group is actually about."

"In spaces I've been in where I felt very comfortable to open up and share, it's been acknowledged that the young people there inherently have value. Like we all have value... So, when we're treated like we know what we're talking about, I think that's really huge."

"Working alongside an organisation as a young person and they are like just overly professional or like, really, really serious - that's a bit off putting. But then I've also been on the flip side where they were just being too chill. So, like finding that kind of balance between showing us you're serious and you're taking it seriously, but also just like being fun and engaging and warm."

"More things where we actually, you know, interact with each other. Do an activity that prompts us to think about the topic, and then discuss it, and then we would really figure out what everyone thinks about it."

"If you have more informal conversations about a topic, we can share our own perspective on the topic and really get something out of it."

Aligning with the insights arising out of Lundy's research noted above, participants expressed how important it is that their views are taken seriously, with outputs clearly evidenced and transparent feedback offered consistently being cited as evidence of positive intent on the part of facilitators and organisations:

"Obviously, if it's ended up on a website or whatever, or the results are being shared, or like we've gotten feedback from other people - share that. Keep us included in the process."

"For me, it's important to just be very transparent. It helps with the whole tokenistic thing. Just being open and transparent about the scope of what they can actually do. You know, if you can't make something happen, say that and explain why."

The views expressed by consultation participants were echoed by those Australia's Youth Representative to the United Nations for 2025, Satara Uthayakumaran:

"We need a kind of structural shift where we don't infantilize young people or treat them as lesser beings... They have the same rights as adults... So, treat them as autonomous beings... I think the other thing to say is kind of going off the point of having young people advising I think this is a really important step. Like, I think it's great that, like, more companies and particularly government bodies, have youth advisory groups, but I would also be careful in saying that I think it's not enough. Like, I think a lot of youth advisory groups are a bit performative and tokenistic, and often are just there, kind of for the government to say that we've done something, or for companies say that... You need to bring in a people from a myriad of backgrounds, and make sure their feedback is actually being implemented, and that follow up is occurring. I've definitely seen many youth boards that have presented recommendations but have never heard back. And so it feels very like you're kind of shouting into the void a bit. So again, it's all about having that infrastructure, but also making sure it's effective."

Those interviewed for the study touched on many of the points concerning tokenism raised above. Across the interviews there was a clearly identified concern for shifting power from adults to young people when possible, and maximising their autonomy within the engagement process:

"I don't think there's like a one size fits all approach. I think how you work depends on the cohort you're working with. And there's just going to be that power imbalance between the worker or professional and the young people, no matter how hard you try to dismiss that. I think that is something that you have to be very mindful of and dismantle where you can. Again, that comes back to things like honesty, transparency and following through with what you say."
- Alcohol and Other Drugs Youth Worker

"For young people to actually have a stake in policies, we need to move beyond that really tokenistic engagement with young people to give them meaningful power and control...There is something here about power and control. And that is often a piece that is missing... We need to be talking about accountability around actually giving some of that power and control to young people... It's also important that when working with young people that we help them understand that the right to participate doesn't mean they have to engage. They can exercise their rights by choosing not to participate." – Academic

Some concerns were also expressed around transparency around the structure of decision-making processes and the outcomes of engagement:

"I noticed that kind of same pattern where I'm talking to highly engaged young people – like young people that are on advisory groups or who you know get pulled into consultations and that kind of stuff – and they're getting a bit frustrated that things haven't happened or like that they're not progressing overly quickly... It's like they're still not quite understanding the mechanisms that are involved within government consultation or a piece of work... I'm kind of having have that conversation with them that like, you know, they're going to go off; they're going to talk to a whole bunch of other people as well; they're going to then, you know, do some report writing; and then it might be, you know, 6 or 12 months down the track before they're at a point to really reflect on what they've heard... That this wasn't communicated to them is obviously a significant problem. And I'm not saying that to be critical of young people, but to be critical of the fact there obviously hasn't been quite enough information and transparency provided to them about exactly what this process is going to involve." - Youth Participation and Development Officer

"The current biggest blocker of youth participation, meaningful youth participation, is not young people, it's decision-makers, right? The issue is not that young people won't say their thoughts. The issue is that decision-makers won't hear their thoughts and we spend so much time and energy setting up all of these consultation mechanisms and doing this and that so young people speak - and no one is really looking at whether can young people be heard."
- Worker at a Digital Think Tank

The need for evidence-giving that centres the voices of young people when evaluating engagement was also acknowledged:

"If we were applying the best available evidence to our policies and practises, we would still be following a human rights-based approach... I think that working in the spirit of the Convention is compatible with giving evidence...

I talk about the need to listen with the intention to act... Because you know, it's not respectful to just go out and ask and ask young people questions as a tick box exercise. That's the opposite of respectful. So, you need to ask yourself, why are you doing this? What are you going to do with what you hear and how are you going to show the young people what the outcome has been of what they told you? You know, how are you going to go back to them?"
- Former National Children's Commissioner

The following contribution provides insights into how such evidence might be usefully deployed by elected representatives:

"When I was elected, I had a real focus on participation… One of my aims was to try and improve interest and enthusiasm for civic engagement. I used to take a bill that I thought would be relevant to children and young people, maybe something on the environment, for example, and then I would go and talk to them about what the bill actually meant in normal language. I'd ask them, what do you think about it? Why is it important to have this law or why is it important that we even talk about this and what is some information that I should know about it? What do you think anyone should know about it? And then I would take that back to Parliament, and I would actually use it in my speech, record it and send them the transcript and everything like that so they could see that people responded to that and it had become a matter of record… We would make sure to try and close that loop when they brought us ideas… When I did speak about it in Parliament, or if I did have that information to draw on during committees and things – they were interested… There is no point just talking about young people's rights, you have to get everyone else to understand them too."
- Former Elected Representative

A reasonably shared understanding between young people and those who work with them prevailed in this study around the importance of rights-based approaches, and a need to face down the charge of tokenism. Both groups tended to favour engagement that:

- Provides safe spaces that treat young people with dignity and respect.
- Deploys engagement techniques that provide young people with opportunities to discuss, feel heard and have fun.
- Maximises young people's capacity to exercise power over the terms of their engagement and decision-making processes.
- Keeps young people in the loop on the outcomes of their engagement.
- Regularly seeks feedback that centre's the voice of young people when reviewing and evaluating projects and initiatives.

Discussion

This report offers a pragmatic view of rights-based youth engagement as a process underpinned by negotiation, reflection and dialogue aimed at aligning policy and practice with human rights frameworks. It suggests that moving towards a more shared understanding of such work does not mean seeking uniformity and the eradication of different perspectives. Rather, it requires transparency and reason-giving around the choices for engagement and decision-making processes that centres the perspectives and expectations of young people as rights holders.

The report acknowledges that human rights principles such as universality and inalienability; indivisibility; inter-dependence and inter-relatedness; equality and non-discrimination; participation and inclusion; and accountability and rule of law establish a basis for orienting the reasons that are offered. However, in bringing attention to the possibility of persisting tensions around safety/autonomy, child rights/parent and carer rights, open access/targeted engagement and minimalist/maximalist interpretations, the report grounds a need to embed deliberation among young people and those who work with them to ensure meaningful, rights-enhancing engagement.

On the topic of rights-enhancing engagement, the report further directs attention to the charge of non-participation and tokenism. However, as the report sets out, fears around tokenism must be set in proportion. Such fear should never be an excuse for not seeking to engage young people – it is their right to participate in the decisions that affect them. Part of the reason-giving process must include evidencing how power is being shifted from adults to young people where possible through the creation of safe, supportive spaces; providing adequate information; enabling young people to interface with decision-makers; and regularly explaining the impact of their contributions on decisions made. This necessarily means building in effective feedback mechanisms that maximise the scope for young people to shape the terms of their engagement.

In addition, the report identifies how rights-based youth engagement is enhanced by diffusing knowledge among young people around the rights they have and how these can be realised through engagement processes. It further highlights how strengthening the work requires ensuring ongoing professional development for those working with young people aimed at building their technical and practical expertise, as well as addressing inconsistencies in decision-making and policymaking processes.

The narrative evidence gathered through the research, although only intended to provide the basis of a tentative conversation starter, provides some hope that the report's observations may provide a basis for a more shared understanding between young people and those who work with them.

The evidence presented indicates some similarities in how young people and those who work with them understand rights-based youth engagement. Both groups valued dignity, respect, transparency, and meaningful influence, and both were critical of tokenistic engagement that fails to treat young people as rights holders with real capacity to shape decisions. Young people consistently described rights in experiential terms – being heard, taken seriously, and able to participate in ways that feel safe, respectful, and relevant to their lives. Those working with young people recognised these same expectations, and often articulated them through formal rights frameworks and professional obligations. There is some evidence to suggest that young people and those working with them share values that help embed rights-based youth engagement.

Where perspectives diverge somewhat is in how constraints and tensions are perceived and navigated. The young people that participated in the research tend to focus on the outcomes of engagement and

are less preoccupied with the interpretive tensions that shape delivery, while the practitioners interviewed were acutely aware of safeguarding duties, organisational risk, parental expectations, and institutional limits. As a result, practitioners often frame challenges such as tokenism, non-participation, and power shifting as design and accountability issues, whereas young people experience them directly as a lack of influence or follow-through. These differences reflect distinct positional standpoints rather than opposing priorities. The research suggests that a more shared understanding emerges when the reasoning behind engagement decisions—particularly where power cannot be fully shared—is made explicit, transparent, and open to dialogue. Despite the nuances and tensions that inhere within the work, more co-ordinated approaches to rights-based youth engagement are possible.

Limitations

The limitations of this report are signalled at the outset. It is not a representative, in-depth study – it is a conversation starter. However, if the conversation is to move forward, some additional information on the limitations of the report must be provided. This information helps clarify the avenues that might prove fruitful for further research.

12 young people participated in the research. These young people were from ACT, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australian and South Australia. They included a mix of gender identities. CALD young people also took part. As evidenced above, their contributions go some way to starting the conversation. However, much more can be done to ensure that the conversation reaches more young people with diverse lived experiences. A good place to start in this regard would be to explore how the conversation can be brought to local youth clubs and settings where the young people in attendance may be less likely to put themselves forward for a consultation with a national peak body like AYAC.

Similarly, more can be done to build on the foundations established by the 12 professionals that work with young people. These professional work in ACT, Victoria, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. They also had considerable experience across a range of roles. The sample contained youth workers, social workers, youth project managers, academics, policy workers, a former National Children's Commissioner and a former elected representative. The insights of these professionals were further contextualised by contributions made during the national roundtable, which brought together young people, youth practitioners, academics and others involved in the youth policy space for a discussion on the urgency of rights-based youth engagement. Still, more can be done to provide a fuller account of the experiences and perspectives of those working with young people to support them claim their rights.

It is hoped that this report serves its purpose as a conversation starter by encouraging a wider and deeper exploration of the issues addressed.

Keeping the conversation going

As the national peak body for young people and those who work with them, we want to keep our focus on the national level. In a previous report, we explored the utility of national youth strategies, youth impact assessments, national youth parliaments and youth quotas at length (Kain & Wotherspoon, 2024). We also made a strong case for how the Australian Government can value and harness the expertise of the youth sector to enhance its youth engagement (Farquhar et al., 2025). We have further advocated enthusiastically for reforms to civics education in schools, and welcomed the government's moves in this direction (AYAC, 2024). All these proposals are in line with enhancing rights-based youth engagement.

However, to avoid simply trotting out the same proposals time and again, we want to use this report to share some short, practical tips on how to strengthen rights-based youth engagement across the design, delivery and evaluation of programs and initiatives.

- **Design**: Ensure that funding applications and delivery plans set out how specific rights intend to be upheld and advanced through the engagement process.
- **Delivery:** Ensure that some time is set aside for discussions with young people on the rights they have and how they relate to the issues addressed through the engagement process.
- **Evaluation:** Ensure the inclusion of evidence that details how attempts were made to shift power to give young people the autonomy to shape the terms of their engagement and decision-making. Centre the voices of young people by making space for the inclusion of narrative evidence that captures their subjective experiences of power shifting.

These are small actionable steps that can help promote the reflection and reason-giving aligned to human rights frameworks advocated for in this report. In simpler terms, they are prompts for keeping the conversation going and turning it into action.

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Appendix 1 – Ethics Statement

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

Informed Consent

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

Confidentiality and Anonymity

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

Mitigation of Potential Harms

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

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

A Rights-Based Approach

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

Methodological Rigour

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

Data Minimisation

Only relevant data was collected to ensure a diverse sample of participants.

Data Security

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