

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON WORKPLACE RIGHTS

Summary Report on
Rights Literacy and Practice

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About AYAC

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia's national peak body representing the needs and interests of young people aged 12-26 years, and the wider youth sector. AYAC is committed to Australia being a nation where young people are respected and have the power to lead change for a better world.

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

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We would like to thank all those that gave up time to participate in the research. We hope that you feel we have treated your words judiciously and offered a thought-provoking report that serves to ignite further conversations on this important topic.

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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Executive Summary

Young people are often employed in casual, insecure and low-paid forms of work that can limit their bargaining power, increase their dependence on employers, and make it more difficult to recognise and assert workplace rights. While public debate frequently focuses on youth job readiness and labour market participation, considerably less attention is paid to young people's status as rights-holders and their ability to challenge workplace exploitation. This is concerning as Australia has obligations under international human rights instruments to protect young people from such exploitation, ensure they are informed of their rights, and enable them to exercise those rights in practice. This report contributes towards a rebalancing of the debate.

Drawing on youth insight poll responses from 500 young people aged 12–26, a consultation with young people from diverse backgrounds and evidence from a national roundtable involving young people, practitioners, academics and advocates, the report examines how young Australians understand workplace rights, where they seek information and the barriers they face in claiming those rights.

The findings indicate that workplace rights literacy among young people varies. While many young people expressed confidence in relation to broad protections, including workplace health and safety and protections against bullying, harassment and discrimination, knowledge was less consistent in more technical areas such as pay rates across awards, casual loading, leave entitlements and unfair dismissal processes. Although many respondents reported acquiring information through family, friends and workplaces, formal education on workplace rights appears inconsistent. Indeed, almost all insight poll respondents agreed that more needs to be done to educate young people about their workplace rights.

The report further finds that young people's uncertainty around aspects of their rights at work tends to reflect system complexity. Australia's workplace relations framework involves overlapping federal and state responsibilities, awards, enterprise agreements and regionally varied employment laws. Participants described employment contracts and workplace documentation as inaccessible, overly technical and difficult to interpret, particularly for those with limited work experience or for whom English may not be a first language. There was strong consensus among participants concerning support for more accessible, practical and youth-friendly explanations of workplace rights and entitlements. This was thought especially important in relation to maximising the impact and utility of civics education.

Importantly, the findings suggest that awareness of rights alone is insufficient if young people do not possess the confidence, support and practical capacity to exercise those rights. Young people overwhelmingly reported that advocating for workplace rights can be challenging. Consultation and roundtable evidence pointed to structural power imbalances between young workers and employers, particularly in insecure forms of employment where concerns around lost shifts, references or dismissal can discourage young people from speaking up. Participants also highlighted difficulties reporting underpayment, bullying, harassment and unsafe work, alongside uncertainty around where to seek support.

At the same time, some young people recognised examples of positive workplace cultures in which employers actively sought to explain rights, encourage feedback and foster respectful working environments. Participants also expressed trust in government sources of information, particularly those associated with official agencies such as the Fair Work Ombudsman. However, concerns were raised about the accessibility of existing resources, which were frequently described as overly text-heavy and difficult to navigate.

The report highlights that young people have thoughtful, nuanced and constructive perspectives on workplace rights and employment practices. Far from being disengaged, participants expressed a strong desire to be involved in policymaking and reform processes affecting their lives and emphasised the importance of meaningful rather than tokenistic engagement.

Taken collectively, the findings suggest that improving young people's experiences of work requires both stronger workplace rights literacy and broader systems reform. Education alone cannot overcome structural barriers if workplace systems remain inaccessible or power imbalances go unaddressed. Equally, legal protections are less effective if young people are not adequately equipped to understand and exercise them.

In response, AYAC recommends a coordinated, rights-based approach to strengthening young people's workplace rights. By way of summary, our recommendations are:

Review the case for a national minimum employment age and harmonise maximum working hours for school-aged young people

Young Australians face a confusing patchwork of state laws governing when they can work and how many hours they can undertake while at school. National standards would provide greater clarity, consistency and protection as young people enter the workforce.

Mandate an accessible Statement of Terms and Working Conditions

Complex employment contracts make it difficult for many young people to understand their rights and entitlements. A simple, accessible Statement of Terms and Working Conditions will improve understanding and help prevent exploitation from the outset of employment.

Continue the crackdown on wage theft through the Fair Work Ombudsman

Recent enforcement efforts have recovered hundreds of millions of dollars in unpaid wages, demonstrating the importance of strong compliance measures. Continued action is needed, particularly in industries where young workers remain vulnerable to persistent underpayment.

Explore further reform of Junior Pay Rates

Recent reforms to junior wages are welcome, but further changes should be considered to ensure 18-year-olds receive fair rates of pay. Evidence indicates reform could improve financial security for young workers while having a modest impact on employers.

Increase the accessibility of government resources

Although government information on workplace rights has improved, many resources remain difficult for young people to navigate. More interactive, youth-friendly resources and video explainers would make workplace rights information easier to understand and use.

Revise civics and citizenship education to improve understanding of workplace rights

Young people need better education on workplace rights that connects classroom learning to real-life experiences. Strengthening teacher training and increasing support from youth workers can help improve young people's confidence to understand and claim their rights.

Embed youth voice across government through Youth Impact Assessments

Youth Impact Assessments would ensure the perspectives and rights of young people are systematically considered across policy development. Embedding them throughout the policy cycle would lead to more effective, transparent and youth-responsive decision-making.

Engage youth sector expertise in the delivery of youth engagement work

Meaningful youth engagement requires more than consultation alone and should avoid tokenistic practices. Drawing on the expertise of the youth sector would strengthen participation processes and ensure young people's voices genuinely shape decisions.

Improving workplace rights for young people is not simply about increasing awareness of entitlements. It is about ensuring that young people are recognised as legitimate rights-holders and supported through systems, workplaces and policies that enable those rights to be meaningfully understood, exercised and upheld in practice.

Introduction

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Australian government has a responsibility to ensure that young people are protected from economic exploitation and harmful work. This includes legislating for minimum employment ages; the appropriate regulation of hours and conditions of employment; and penalties or sanctions to ensure effective enforcement. The Convention further establishes that young people are to be educated about their rights and provided with adequate information so that they can put those rights into practice. Delivering on these responsibilities requires ensuring that young people are equipped to navigate the complexities of Australia's federal political structure and regionally variegated patchwork of workplace rights.

Research undertaken by AYAC reveals that young people feel that more can be done to educate them about their rights (Farquhar & Wotherspoon, 2026). Our work further shows that young people are concerned about unemployment, precarious work, rates of pay and the cost of living (Farquhar et al., 2026). Similar findings are recorded in national and international studies (ILO, 2024; Walsh et al., 2025). Yet few studies explore young Australians' literacy and practice concerning their workplace rights.¹ In addition, some key pieces of research on the topic are becoming a little dated (see McDonald & Dear, 2005; McDonald et al., 2013; McDonald et al., 2014). This leaves it unclear whether and how the well-documented concerns relating to employment felt by young Australians today might be alleviated by embedding and deepening the existing legislative and institutional mechanisms aimed at ensuring rights literacy and compliance in the workplace.

A study by Howe et al. (2025) points to the enduring relevance of exploring young people's perspectives on the protections and entitlements afforded to them in the workplace. This research presents evidence of underpayment, break prevention and withholding of entitlements concerning young workers. The research also signals that a lack of awareness and education is a barrier to young workers claiming their rights and entitlements. Similar findings are recorded at a more local level by Westjustice (2021; 2025). This report delves further into how young Australians' understanding of their rights shapes their experiences and outcomes in the workplace.² The report provides needed additional data concerning young people's perceived knowledge gaps and how these can be addressed through a rights-based, strengths-focused, cross sector approach to rights literacy and compliance.

¹ This is especially true when compared to the voluminous literature and commentary concerning young people's workplace readiness and perceived capacity to adapt to the shifting needs of employers and labour market dynamics.

² Howe et al (2025) provided a substantive piece of research the scope of which is beyond this much smaller project. To maximise the impact of the study we have:

- Provided additional consultation and statistical evidence on young people's subjective experiences concerning perceived knowledge gaps and reporting difficulties, building upon the insights from the 12-person co-design aspect of Howe et al. (2025).
- Explored educational settings as sources of knowledge on workplace rights in our youth insight poll, allowing for some indicative findings around whether rights at work are being addressed thoroughly through formal education.
- Focused more on nationally standardising a minimum working age and working hours that young people under 18 still in education can work. This aligns the report with research undertaken by McDonald and colleagues which is now more dated.

Framing Young People's Workplace Rights in Australia

Australia's federal political structure complicates the administration of workplace rights. While most employees are covered by the national Fair Work Act 2009, some state public sector workers and local government employees remain covered by separate state industrial relations systems. There is also variation between states and territories in areas including long service leave, work health and safety regulation, anti-discrimination laws, and public holidays. In addition, there is no nationally uniform minimum age for employment, and legal restrictions affecting the hours and conditions under which school-aged young people may work differ across jurisdictions. Given this systemic complexity, it is imperative that young people are equipped with the knowledge needed to navigate these systems and claim their rights.

This report examines young people's views on whether they feel adequately informed about their workplace rights and what steps may be needed to build their confidence in exercising those rights. To provide focus, it explores the following themes and questions:

Minimum age for employment: Are young people aware of the minimum employment age in their state, and where to find reliable information and advice?

Pay rates and leave entitlements: Do young people understand the national minimum wage and how junior pay rates are calculated? Are they aware of casual loading and awards? Do they know their potential leave entitlements and where to seek guidance about pay?

Workplace health and safety: Are young people aware of their rights and protections in this area, and do they know how to access advice or raise concerns?

Workplace bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination: Do young people understand these protections, the processes for making complaints and where to obtain support? Do they feel confident accessing support?

Unfair dismissal: Are young people familiar with the criteria for unfair dismissal, the avenues for redress, and the sources of information and assistance available to them?

Advice and support: How accessible do young people find services offering advice and support? What sources of advice and support do they seek out? Are there any barriers to them accessing relevant information and services?

Reporting and compliance: How confident do young people feel in advocating for their rights in the workplace? What barriers are there? How might those barriers be overcome?

This framing allows young people to reflect on a broad range of workplace rights and experiences.

Methodology

The report adopts a mixed-method approach, combining youth insight poll work, youth consultation and findings from a national roundtable. This combination of qualitative and quantitative methods provides a range of insights that enable credible, exploratory analysis. Each aspect of the research process is set out below.

Youth Insight Poll

Four questions concerning workplace rights were presented to 500 young people aged 12-26. AYAC recruited 250 respondents through its organisational networks and Youth Brains Trust, while the remaining half was recruited through Student Edge.³ Three Youth Brains Trust members that promoted the insight poll among peers also took part in a workshop on quantitative methods and provided feedback on the findings that has been incorporated into the analysis.

The breakdown of respondents' place of residence by state/territory is New South Wales - 35 per cent; Victoria - 23 per cent; Western Australia - 12 per cent; Queensland - 13 per cent; South Australia - 8 per cent; Australian Capital Territory - 3 per cent; Tasmania - 2 per cent; and Northern Territory - 2 per cent.

Young women, young men and young people that are non-binary participated in the insight poll. Respondents also included young First Nations Australians; those who identify as LGBTQIA+; those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds; those who live in regional, rural and remote areas; young people living with a disability; those identifying as working class; and young carers.

While not a nationally representative piece of work, the insight poll contained representation from young people across Australia with diverse lived experiences. It therefore serves its exploratory purpose of providing a series of insights to be contextualised by narrative evidence and additional research.

Youth Consultations

Youth consultations were undertaken with young people to provide narrative evidence to contextualise the referenced statistics. The more open-ended nature of the focus groups encouraged participants to provide detailed accounts of their views and clarify any ambiguities in partnership with the researchers (O'Toole, 2003; Barbour, 2008). Taking the advice of Marsh et al. (2007), the researchers embraced a flexible and reflexive approach that avoided imposing a narrow definition of the issues under study. Consistent with the approach advocated by O'Toole et al. (2003), the researchers sought to limit the formality of the focus groups and involve participants in a partnership where they could more freely explore and elaborate what workplace rights mean to them. This proved effective as participants shared openly on core themes concerning workplace rights.

Following recruitment through its networks, AYAC recruited 8 young people aged 12-26 to participate in the consultation. This included representation from Victoria, South Australia, Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia and New South Wales. Young men, young women and gender diverse young people participated. Young people who are CALD, LGBTQIA+, living with a disability and identify as working class took part. The group also included those living in metropolitan areas, as well as those from regional, rural and remote communities.

³ The Youth Brains Trust comprises young AYAC members from across Australia.

Their contributions go some way towards providing a series of narratives through which the data presented in the report might be contextualised and understood.

National Roundtable

Insights from a national roundtable addressing the theme of young people's rights in the workplace inform this research. The roundtable was inclusive of young people, youth practitioners, academics and others working in the youth policy space. Panel speakers were:

- Professor Paula McDonald (Queensland University of Technology)
- Jess Munday (Unions Tasmania)
- Taihan Rahman (Youth Advocate)

In total, 47 people participated in the event. Their contributions provide additional lenses through which to understand young people's experiences and perspectives concerning workplace rights.

Findings

This section presents the research findings. Each finding is supported by a synthesis of evidence from the youth insight poll, consultation and national roundtable.

Youth workplace rights literacy varies and more can be done to ensure young people are educated about their rights and can confidently navigate system complexity to claim their rights.

The insight poll presented eight statements concerning knowledge about workplace rights. Respondents were asked to select any of the statements that applied to them. The results are indicated below:

I know... (tick all that apply)	
I know what age you are allowed to start working in my state, and the maximum number of hours I can work.	58%
I know the minimum wage and how to calculate junior rates of pay for different awards	39.4%
I know about what casual loading is and when you are eligible for it	32%
I know how to calculate holiday time	27.4%
I know about health and safety in the workplace	56.8%
I know about protections against bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace	54.6%
I know the rules around what makes a dismissal or being let go from your job unfair and how I can appeal an unfair decision	34.8%
I do not feel I have been educated well enough about any of these	18%
Did not disclose	7.8%

A broad range of workplace rights and entitlements were gauged through the statements. Yet almost 1 in 5 respondents did not feel like they have been adequately educated to select any of the statements. In addition, only a minority felt confident enough to affirm knowledge on key areas pertaining to workplace rights, such as the minimum wage and calculating junior wages for different awards; casual loading; calculating holiday pay; and the rules and appeals processes concerning unfair dismissal. Most respondents were aware of some key areas, including minimum ages and maximum hours; health and safety; and workplace bullying, harassment and discrimination. However, signalling the space for renewed efforts to build youth workplace rights literacy, no statement was selected by more than 60 per cent of respondents.⁴

⁴ These findings are broadly consistent with earlier findings from McDonald et al. (2013, p.52) that “overall, students were not well informed about their work-related entitlements or regulatory constraints governing employment.” The combination of rights articulated in the statements and the specific technical knowledge inquired about arguably set a higher bar than affirming a general knowledge around

The insight poll evidence further suggests that the findings regarding workplace rights literacy reflect uneven education. Just 35 per cent of respondents stated that they found out about their rights at work from school, TAFE or university. Moreover, 93 per cent agreed that more needs to be done to educate young people about their workplace rights.

When presented with these findings, a Youth Brains Trust member said the following:

I'm not surprised... When I shared the poll with friends, one of my friends replied to say she didn't really realise about workplace rights until she did the poll... This is my kind of biasing, but I've never been taught about calculating holiday pay, I don't even know what age you're allowed to start working. Like I mainly knew I could start working because friends had started working... Like when you start working, you get all these things to sign. It's just like signing a contract, it's not really educational...

AYAC Youth Brains Trust Member

Consultation evidence throws additional light on the findings by explaining how a general awareness among young people that they have certain rights at work can coexist with a lack of confidence in their knowledge concerning specific rights and entitlements.

Consultation participants acknowledged that although they were aware that they had rights at work, their understanding varied and often felt incomplete:

"Generally, I would say that I don't have that much knowledge around my rights."

"I don't really know that much about wages and job-specific rights...When it comes to wages and more job-specific things, the only thing I'm familiar with is the wage differences between ages."

"I knew about things like getting your breaks, casual versus full-time and part-time, those sorts of things, but I'm still a little bit vague on, you know, key ethics."

Participants tended to focus on pay during the early phases of the discussion. A participant disclosed that they had pay withheld and had to undertake an arduous process to ensure that they were paid properly. Another mentioned that a friend of theirs had been promised a reward voucher as recognition for increased productivity that was withheld. In addition, a participant raised how they were only made aware of possible underpayment because they were able to seek advice from a relative with more work experience. Some participants also shared that they were unsure about holiday pay and casual loading eligibility.

When the facilitator sought to broaden the conversation beyond pay, respondents noted that other rights at work and regional variations in employment laws can be thought of as more peripheral concerns that can be mediated through ideas around pay:

"I think that pay is probably the primary focus. Like, I don't think in my experience, I've ever had a very significant health and safety precaution."

workplace rights. However, it is noteworthy how concerns around not feeling adequately educated about the specifics surface elsewhere in the insight poll, youth consultation and national roundtable. In this sense, the findings usefully illuminate some areas around technical knowledge to be addressed in partnership with young people.

“I think a lot of the time when we maybe are having a bad night, we're in an unsafe environment, a non-supportive environment, our instant mindset is, oh, if I got paid more, it would make up for these things. But then I'll have quiet nights where I'm relaxing, I'm having a good time, and all of a sudden, my pay isn't that bad... So, it's actually the conditions and the working environment we're in.”

“I think the reason why we go to pay quite instantly is because it is a number, you can quantify it. Like, a dollar in my hand is worth the same as a dollar in your hand. But something like harassment, even though there is a very precise legal definition, it can be more vague, it's not exactly as easy to define, you know? Like pay can become a proxy for things that are harder to name. It's legible... If my manager makes me feel uneasy in a job, the brain can convert it into, like I should be paid more. Which means when young people are saying it's about money the thing they might be trying to say is, 'I don't like my conditions and work', you know?”

This conversation sparked an insightful discussion around bullying, harassment and discrimination in the workplace that will be addressed in the next section on the impact of structural power imbalances between young workers and employers. First, it is worthwhile to unpack the prevailing sense among participants that their understanding concerning workplace rights was in some ways incomplete.

This sense of incompleteness concerning their understanding of workplace rights in part reflected a belief that they had not been adequately educated about their rights:

“All of my understanding has come from personal experience – not education.”

“I would say there's probably near nothing [done to explain to young people their rights before they start working].”

“School-wise, I think, if you choose certain electives, like commerce or business, you might have a basic understanding, but I know in my state anyway, our syllabus doesn't go into it that much. They over-emphasise that you will have an agreement, and that will be your rights, but it doesn't really tell you how to interpret those.”

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that participants mentioned a need to improve education on workplace rights, with some making a strong case for practical, interactive modes of learning that focus on scenarios that are relevant to young people's everyday lives:

“I think it all starts with education. So, we have a beautiful thing, our national curriculum. There are some states, like New South Wales, which does bump it up a little bit, but it's nearly like the minimum wage for education. It's saying every state must at least cover these topics and this syllabus... But I think if we can get the civic education on the national curriculum to where it needs to be, we improve things holistically.”

“Make it practical. Like, if I'm having to read through a lot of websites to find this information and I am a young male that's disengaged from my, like, reading, I'm probably not going to retain the information. Whereas if you actually make it practical and you can even role-play what happens when the principal underpays their staff, and actually relate that to young students. I think that'll help them be able to retain it until they get a job.”

A perceived lack of education was not the only barrier to a confident understanding of workplace rights identified by participants. For them, the system through which workplace rights are administered and enforced is complex and difficult to navigate:

“We recently redid our enterprise agreement, which goes for all our rights, what we're entitled to, our breaks, all of the fun stuff. One of the biggest things we noticed was a lot of the young people working... didn't know how to read it. It's a 60, 70-page document... When you apply for the job and get the job, you still don't know what you've signed up to.”

“We need to get rid of legalese because it is overcomplicated and makes everything so much harder for everybody.”

“Wage theft is obviously very illegal. But I think that young people are gonna struggle to read an employment contract, and struggle to identify wage theft, unless it's really obvious.”

Participants further expressed concerns about how the complexity of the system can disadvantage those for whom English might be a second language:

“I would be more worried about the people that might be much more vulnerable. Like people with less English... I think they would be vulnerable, partially because if you read a legal document, it's a bit overwhelming because of all the terms have to be rigorous and precise. It's like, you know when you first open a textbook, and it's like words you've never seen before? And especially if English isn't your first language, that extra sense of overwhelmingness is going to be pretty scary.”

Participants felt more should be required by employers to support them to understand their rights in the workplace:

“I think that it is just not our responsibility to be educated. It should be the workplace's responsibility to make it a lot more clear for young people to follow.”

Support was expressed for executive overviews at the beginning of contracts outlining the rights of young workers and the responsibilities of employers in easy English:

“Maybe just have some type of basic executive summary of what the contract means because they do a really good job of making it hard to read. It's just a document that people go, ‘that's too much, I'll just put it to the side’. And then they do... Then it's like what breaks am I allowed in total?”

“I think a summary would give the young person a little bit more confidence in, the work that they're doing. They'd have a better relationship with their workplace in general. I work as a gymnastics coach at the moment and we have a lot of young people coming in and out of roles there, and it seems like, you know, there's a lot of misunderstanding as to what's expected, or how the role itself works. But if they know that there are certain rules, they could bring it up and would feel more confident in raising an issue. You would have a better work culture in the end.”

Young advocate, Taihan, usefully summed up the concerns around uneven education and system complexity raised by those that took part in the consultation as follows:

“As young people, we're expected to navigate systems like education or the workplace, but we're not equipped to do that confidently... We don't really feel prepared, and I think it's a common experience for a lot of young people. I think for us, it's also not just about knowing our rights, but it's actually having the power and the confidence to act on it... First, it's awareness. So, if young people don't know about reporting systems, how can we expect them to use them? And second, these kinds of processes can take a lot of time and require a lot of knowledge, and a lot of commitment on the young person's behalf. So, I think we really need to think about changing those systems and educating young people on the way that they can use them to stand up for their rights... It's important to understand that being confused doesn't mean that you've done something wrong and that it's probably the fact that the system is really complicated and wasn't built with us in mind.”

Taihan, National Roundtable

Tellingly, these concerns are not new and have formed the basis on research-informed advocacy over decades in Australia:

“I've researched this area for about 20 years... I've been a strong advocate for finding some kind of harmony or consistency across the states and territories in terms of child employment laws... The Fair Work Act is basically silent on child employment laws, except for the youth wage system, which is wholly discriminatory... The Commonwealth defers child employment laws to the states. And what we have at the moment is a complete hodgepodge of laws across different states and territories... We need to be working at the structural level. Part of that is regulatory and strengthening and harmonising laws across the country. I think we also need codes of conduct for large employers who employ a lot of young people. We need much better monitoring of what's happening in workplaces... Individual rights and individual agency at the workplace level can only go so far. We also need those bigger structural reforms.”

Professor Paula McDonald, National Roundtable

Young people believe it is often challenging to claim their rights in the workplace, which in part reflects structural power imbalances requiring cultural changes and systemic oversight. However, they recognise when employers make the effort to mitigate the imbalance.

The insight poll shows that 86 per cent of respondents agree that it is usually a challenge for young people to advocate for their rights in the workplace. How this reflects structural power imbalances between young people and employers was a core theme of the national roundtable:

“There is an honest conversation we need to have about power and who holds it in relationships. Because of your age as a young worker or your newness to employment, the employer has relative power. They control rosters, they control shifts, and they've been doing this for a while. An imbalance exists... We hear about

casual employment or flexibility. And flexibility can be a wonderful thing, but it can mean that you are expectations you to be on call 24-7 or that you should work more without proper pay.”

Jess Munday, National Roundtable

“So, I'll start with pay. I think it's pretty clear to see that pay isn't the only barrier. I feel like pay is something that's really visible, whereas the real issues are very much structural and not as obvious. But when we think about power imbalance for young workers, it's often worsened by casual or really insecure employment. Young people can be seen as easily replaceable. They don't have as much bargaining power when they're negotiating with employers who have control over things like shifts, hours, and references. This means that as young people, we don't have the same level of power to actually challenge structural inequalities in treatment that we're receiving within the workplace.”

Taihan, National Roundtable

Not only are young people likely to be employed in precarious, low paid forms of work, given their relative limited work experience there is a greater likelihood that asymmetries in knowledge between them and employers (also see Standing, 2021; The Smith Family, 2023; Farquhar et al. 2025; Howe & Dillon, 2025).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, issues around imbalances in power animated discussion among consultation participants. This conversation focused in on some of the general conditions that structurally disadvantage young people in relation to employers:

“Yeah, so I just also wanted to bring up something different than wages and pay, and that comes to, I guess, the supportiveness of where you're meant to go to complain about any of these rights being broken and what to do about it. I guess even just having the sentence pattern of, what do I even say? Because you might think I'm going to lose my job, and a lot of times, if young people are working, they need that money. So, they are willing to do anything to keep that job.”

“I think the imbalance of power exists because of an information asymmetry or is stemming from, like, a lack of reference. In school, everything is in front of you. You know all the rules... Everything is obvious. But, like, in the workplace, you're not really sure what's normal... Like, you may not have as strong of a reference... And so, I think the imbalance of power comes first from an information asymmetry, and also from, like, a bit of a power asymmetry.”

“Imbalances in power always creates room for abuse. Whether that's emotional, physical, sexual, general harassment, I mean, it really does give that person in power the space to do almost whatever they want, especially to someone in a disadvantaged position, such as a young person. Another thing is people in power typically see young people as something below or smaller than somebody who has a few more years on them. So, there's a lot of disrespect and subconscious bias that goes against young people, and stereotypes.”

As the conversation developed, attention turned to the difficulties associated with reporting bullying, harassment and discrimination:

“I know friends that have personally gone through harassment. The biggest issue here is knowing where to be able to complain, and I've had personal friends who have experienced sexual harassment in a workplace. And it's usually from someone in a position of power. And it's like, what am I meant to do? Where do I complain? What are the supports? What are my rights?”

Participants further raised difficulties around following up with employers on issues around underpayment:

“My personal experience has been that my employer withheld pay, which really enforced a power imbalance. Particularly when I deserved the pay legally but had to prove it to my employer and combat them mentally. So like it became like an intersection of workplace safety and fair pay and the concept of being deserving of my rights.”

There was also a sense among some participants that more can be done to hold employers to account in their dealings with young people:

“There’s definitely a lack of employers being held accountable to young people.”

However, there were positive practices aimed at mitigating the imbalances of power to better empower young people as rights-holders in the workplace that were also noted. Participants mentioned how they felt confident raising issues with their employers, who had treated them fairly and with respect. Some also commended their employers for the proactive and open way in which they had sought to disseminate information around their rights and entitlements. The following remarks by a Youth Brains Trust member captured some key insights in this regard:

“The CEO is just really lovely in general and she makes an effort... She’ll say hi to everyone and like check in with you. She’ll sit in the lunchroom and have lunch with everyone. Just recently we had a staff meeting and there wasn’t any complaints or work health and safety concerns raised, and she actually made a point to say there is usually one thing. She was very inviting of if there is something wrong, please do submit it. She also offered to go over the reporting process. She was just very welcoming of feedback.”

AYAC Youth Brains Trust Member

Young people recognise power imbalances in the workplace, as well as how conscientious employers seek to mitigate these.

Young people access information on workplace rights from a variety of sources. They tend to trust government sources but believe more can be done to make these accessible.

As shown below, the most common sources of information on workplace rights accessed by insight poll respondents were family, friends and educational institutions. Just over a quarter of respondents obtained information directly through their workplace. Government sources of information, including the Fair Work Ombudsman and Australian Government Digital Youth Hub, were less likely to be accessed by respondents. Trade unions were among the least

frequently accessed sources of information among respondents. Only 6 per cent of respondents did not obtain some information on workplace rights from any of these sources.

Where did you find out about your workplace rights (tick all that apply)	
Family	35.6%
Friends	31.4%
Work	27%
School/TAFE/University	35%
Trade Union	8.4%
Fair Work Ombudsman	22%
Australian Government Digital Youth Hub	8.4%
Other Government source	6%
None of the above	6.2%
Did not disclose	18%

Interestingly, when presented with this evidence an AYAC Youth Brains Trust member raised that while most findings were consistent with what they would have reasonably expected, they were suspicious that the figure for the Australian Government Digital Youth Hub might be a bit high, suggesting that most of their peers have not heard of it. Given that AYAC has worked closely with the Australian Government on its youth engagement work, and half of respondents were recruited through AYAC's networks, the possibility of some inflation in this regard should most certainly not be dismissed.

Evidence from the consultations nonetheless provides some useful frames for contextualising the insight poll findings. Firstly, although family and friends were mentioned as a source of information that can alert young people to their rights and entitlements at work, participants stressed a perceived need to find out more from other sources to verify the information they received:

"I would trust my family to start off as a base of knowledge, and then further learn from other websites."

A similar case was made about finding out about rights through work. As alluded to above, participants tended to feel that more could be done by employers to make rights and entitlements clearer to young people. In addition, some questioned the quality and depth of the knowledge and advice offered by employers:

"And then there was also an issue of the managers and the leaders within the organization themselves not understanding. So, when we would come to them for a question, they'd go, well, I don't know. Or they were even breaking the agreement themselves."

Government sources were the most trusted source of information among participants:

"Personally, I would go for, like, government sources. You know, Fair Work Commission, those government kinds of sources, because that's what I would trust the most."

“To be honest, if it has the Australian government logo on it, I'll believe it. I would trust anything I think an employer would trust.”

However, participants raised concerns around the accessibility of some of these sources of information. When taken through a guided tour of the Australian Government's Digital Youth Hub, which links directly to information on employment rights from the Fair Work Ombudsman, participants shared the following feedback:

“I'm already overwhelmed. I would have clicked out already. I'm done.”

“Yeah, I'm on Chat GPT now.”

“Way too much text... There could be a much easier-to-read summaries with a more in-depth description to click on, but I see no reason why I need to click more than 3 times to find such simple information.”

“If I want just a simple answer, I should be able to get that in less than 5 clicks.”

This suggests it is less a matter of trust in relation to the information provided by government sources on workplace rights than it is a matter of translation. The material itself needs to be translated into more accessible media for young people. Participants offered the following suggestions:

“I really like the front page. It looks amazing. But the fact that it takes you to another government website, which looks so dull, and you have to look for the information yourself is so hard. If the information was summarized on that page, but they gave you a link for reference, like, this is where we sourced this information from, then it would make it a lot easier.”

“I think that it could be a lot more interactive... Like, have the facts, the absolute basic stuff first and then like a quiz for more specific information.”

“Think for a video... I can see it being a reel. Yeah, I can definitely see that being very accessible to a wide range of people, especially to people who wouldn't necessarily know as much or be as informed or be as willingly go out of their way to search for it.”

Trade unions were not raised independently by participants on the call. Finding this an interesting omission, the facilitator asked why trade unions had not been mentioned up to that point. The responses from participants were revealing:

“I think of them as more for, like, you know, full-time employees that are doing their work every day.”

“Like, I know they exist, and I know that they're like a way for workers to get together and to bargain collectively... Like, I know Amazon's been trying to bust for a while now. But... I think that... like, I never figured it would apply to me, because... I don't know why... But, yeah, I am very surprised we haven't talked about them. Now that you mention it, it's like talking at, like, a firefighter's conference and not talking about, like, fire trucks.”

“Maybe it's because as young people, we feel like we're not important or old enough to be represented by a union.”

These insights suggest that despite growing trade union membership among young people, some young workers can find it difficult to connect with unions (see Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2025)

Young people and those that work to support them in realising their rights at work recognise the role that the state can play in advancing rights and strengthening existing provisions. However, they also believe that more can be done to involve young people in the development and implementation of policymaking.

During the roundtable there was an acknowledgement that government plays a meaningful role in advancing workplace rights, with the decision to allocate additional funding to the Fair Work Ombudsman to tackle wage theft being singled out for praise. The decision to abolish junior pay rates for young people over 18 working under retail, fast food and pharmacy awards with six months experience was also thought a positive development. Indeed, this decision was also welcomed by a number of consultation participants:

“The fact that the junior pay rates have been abolished for 18 to 20-year-olds in retail awards and hospitality awards. Yeah, it's only for a couple of awards, but I think that's been a big compliment to the young people who are working those jobs.”

While some participants acknowledged the case for junior wages in terms of ensuring active labour market participation among young people, they also drew attention to some perceived unfairness:

“I think realistically pay still needs to be less. I think if we want to get young people into the workforce, it has to be less. There'd be no reason why a business would employ someone with 40 years of experience and someone with no experience. But I definitely think that bottom line, national minimum wage for anyone under 18 now definitely needs to be reviewed, because a lot of young people already have experience... I'm 17 now, next year I'll get a 40% increase in pay. I'm a bit confused as to what will be different in 12 months, as to why I'm worth 40% more.”

Young people have interesting things to say on workplace rights and employment practices. It was also clear throughout the research that they wish to have these insights considered by decision-makers:

“Young people aren't disengaged, they're somewhat disillusioned. Especially with the current political system that systematically leaves them out in a way that prevents them from being engaged. Because it can be really easy to think of it as young people don't want to engage... Often that engagement is such a tick-box exercise that we're kind of doing for the sake of it. But co-design is what really makes sure that the decisions and policies that we make about young people are actually made with young people.”

Given the nuanced expression of lived experiences and perspectives that informed this research, it is difficult to see how decision-making process would not be enhanced by the meaningful involvement of young people.

Discussion

At the outset of this report, it was suggested that the conversation around young people and employment is unbalanced. So often, the discussion around young people and employment focuses on their job readiness and flexibility to meet the needs of employers. It is less common for such discussions to centre young people as rights-holders. This sidelines the responsibilities of the state and employers to ensure that young people are not exploited at work.

The findings of the report indicate that more can be done to educate young people about workplace rights and equip them with the confidence to exercise those rights in practice. While many young people displayed awareness of broad workplace protections, such as workplace health and safety, bullying and discrimination, confidence varied considerably across more technical areas, including pay rates, casual loading, leave entitlements and the specifics around unfair dismissal.

The findings further suggest that knowledge concerning workplace rights is often acquired informally through family, peers or lived experience, rather than through structured educational pathways. Although schools, TAFEs and universities were identified as sources of information by some respondents, the evidence indicates that civics and workplace education is not being delivered consistently or in sufficiently practical ways to prepare young people for employment.

The unevenness in rights literacy appears particularly significant when considered alongside the complexity of Australia's workplace relations system. Young people entering employment are required to navigate a system characterised by overlapping federal and state responsibilities, awards, enterprise agreements, varying child employment laws and technical legal language. Consultation participants repeatedly described feeling overwhelmed by employment terms and conditions, unsure of the 'fine print', and not always clear on where to seek support when problems emerged. This confusion should not be interpreted simply as disengagement or irresponsibility on the part of young workers. Rather, it is more appropriately read as a byproduct of the complexity of workplace rights frameworks, and how these are frequently not designed in ways that are accessible to young people, especially those with limited employment experience.

The report further demonstrates that literacy alone is insufficient if young people do not possess the confidence, institutional support and practical capacity to claim their rights. Insight poll respondents overwhelmingly agreed that advocating for workplace rights is often challenging for young people. Consultation and roundtable evidence further points to structural power imbalances between young workers and employers as a major contributing factor. Young people are often in casual, insecure and low-paid employment, where employers hold significant power over rosters, hours, references and continued employment. In these contexts, raising concerns about underpayment, bullying, harassment or unsafe work can feel risky, particularly where young people rely on employment to meet financial pressures associated with rising living costs.

The findings also indicate that many young people experience workplace rights not as discrete legal categories, but through broader feelings of fairness, respect and workplace culture. Pay frequently emerged as an entry point into discussions concerning rights, yet consultation participants demonstrated that concerns around wages often acted as proxies for broader dissatisfaction with unsafe, disrespectful or unsupported working environments. This highlights the importance of understanding workplace rights not solely through legal compliance, but also

through relational and cultural dynamics that shape whether young people feel respected, heard and empowered at work.

Importantly, the findings reveal that positive workplace cultures can mitigate some of the structural disadvantages experienced by young workers. Participants recognised and valued employers who proactively explained entitlements, encouraged open communication, welcomed feedback and created psychologically safe workplace environments. Such examples suggest that while structural reform is necessary, employer practices also matter. A workplace culture that treats young workers as valued contributors and rights-holders can improve confidence, trust and compliance outcomes.

The findings additionally suggest that young people trust government sources of information concerning workplace rights, particularly those associated with official agencies. However, trust does not necessarily translate into accessibility. Participants often described existing digital resources as overly text-heavy, difficult to navigate and poorly tailored to the communication preferences of young people. This suggests a challenge not of credibility, but of translation. If governments are serious about improving workplace rights literacy, information must be communicated in formats that are practical, accessible and relevant to young people's everyday lives, including through interactive tools, videos, scenario-based learning and easy-English summaries.

The report also points to the importance of involving young people in the development of workplace rights policy and educational initiatives. Throughout the research, young people demonstrated nuanced understandings of power, fairness, workplace culture and systemic barriers. Far from being disengaged, participants consistently expressed a desire to contribute to solutions and highlighted frustration with consultation processes perceived as tokenistic. Meaningful co-design with young people is therefore likely to strengthen both the legitimacy and effectiveness of future reforms.

Taken together, the findings suggest that strengthening young people's workplace rights requires a dual focus on literacy and systems change. Greater investment is needed in practical, strengths-focused education that supports young people to understand and confidently exercise their rights. However, education alone cannot resolve structural barriers. Workplace rights frameworks must also become simpler, more accessible and easier to navigate. This includes exploring opportunities to harmonise aspects of youth employment regulation, strengthen employer obligations around communicating entitlements and improve access to clear, youth-friendly information and reporting pathways.

To improve workplace rights for young people we must move beyond simply increasing awareness to working towards the creation of systems and workplace cultures that recognise young people as legitimate rights-holders and ensure that the protections available to them can be understood, trusted and meaningfully exercised in practice.

Recommendations

AYAC recognises that empowering young people in the workplace requires both systemic and cultural change. Our recommendations aim to strengthen youth rights literacy and the system of workplace rights more broadly.

Review the case for a national minimum employment age and harmonising the maximum working hours for school-aged young people across state jurisdictions

Over 20 years ago, McDonald and Dear (2005) raised the case for a national minimum employment age and harmonising maximum working hours for school-aged Australians. Noting the requirement set out in Article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that Australia provide for minimum age(s) in employment, they explain how the clarity of a national standard has not been afforded to young Australians, who must negotiate a complex patchwork of legislation across states governing the minimum working age and maximum hours those at school can work. This patchwork persists today. To provide clarity to young people as they commence their journey through employment, AYAC recommends reviewing the case for national standards to regulate the minimum working age and harmonise the maximum working hours for young people still at school across state jurisdictions.

Mandate the provision of an accessible Statement of Terms of Working Conditions at the beginning of employment

This study shows that young Australians experience difficulties in understanding the complex and often dense legal language that form employment contracts. This impedes their ability to fully claim their rights and entitlements in the workplace. For this reason, AYAC supports Youth Law Australia's (2026) advocacy for a Statement of Terms and Working Conditions to be provided to all workers at the outset of their employment. This Statement would provide accessible information on the nature of the employment and basic entitlements, as well as set out employment expectations and practices that are legally prohibited. Youth Law Australia notes that similar clarifying documentations are required in New Zealand and the UK.

Continue the crackdown on wage theft through Fair Work Ombudsman

The Australian Government has made a concerted effort to crackdown on wage theft through the Fair Work Ombudsman. In 2024/25, the Fair Work Ombudsman (2025) recovered more than \$358 million in unpaid wages for 249,000 workers. However, reflecting the ground still to cover, the Fair Work Ombudsman (2025, p.42) states "fast food, restaurants and cafes remain a priority due to persistent and significant non-compliance in the sector. Workers are commonly young, and include visa holders, who may be unaware of their workplace rights or unwilling to speak up. Many are employed in a casual or part-time capacity". AYAC believe that these enforcement mechanisms should continue apace alongside broader efforts to embed workplace rights literacy and compliance.

Explore the further reform of Junior Pay Rates

AYAC welcomes the recent decision to reform Junior Pay Rates for young people employed in retail, fast food and pharmacies. However, consistent with our previous advocacy, we recommend that the government explores abolishing junior wages for young people at the age of 18 (see AYAC, 2026). Westjustice (2025) note that this will alleviate financial strain for young workers, while recognising their capacity to perform the same tasks to the same standard as those in receipt of the adult award. Westjustice further cites evidence suggesting that abolishing junior pay rates for this demographic would lead to a small increase in the wage bill of employers and strengthen effective demand in the economy.

Increase the accessibility of government resources

AYAC commends the Australian Government's efforts to embed young people's voices in decision-making processes across government through the Office for Youth. The development of the Digital Youth Hub has improved young people's access to quality information on workplace rights from the Fair Work Ombudsman. However, navigating the information can be a little tricky given its scale, density and reliance on text. AYAC recommends continuing to work with young people to develop more interactive, youth-friendly resources and video explainers. This will support the operation of employment rights by making them more accessible to young people.

Revise civics and citizenship education to improve understanding of workplace rights

AYAC recommends improving civics and citizenship education so that students better understand their workplace rights and feel more able to claim them. Consistent with AYAC's (2024) advocacy in this space, we suggest:

- Encouraging a focus on active, non-formal and experiential learning that supports young people to link the theory of workplace rights and entitlements to 'real world' situations.
- Improving civic and citizenship education for pre-service teachers to provide direction on how to confidently engage in meaningful discussions with students around their workplace rights and entitlements.
- Advocating for increased funding for youth workers to engage with young people in school and community settings to support them to realise their workplace rights. Youth workers bring skills and engagement techniques that complement the work done by teachers and others in this space.

Embed youth voice across government through rights-based Youth Impact Assessments (YIAs)

Because young people express a desire to realise their right to be involved in decision-making processes, we suggest embedding YIAs. These are tools to evaluate the potential of proposed policies, programs and legislation on young people. Sometimes referred to as 'youth checks', these instruments aim to ensure that the needs, perspectives and rights of young people are systematically considered in the policymaking process – including through direct engagement and consultation with young people – and that the resulting policy is more effective, appropriate, and fit for purpose (OECD, 2020; Payne, 2019).

The Australian Human Rights Commission (2023) provides a YIA template for policymakers. Kain (2024) further provides the following guidance for effective implementation of YIAs:

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

By drawing on these resources, policymakers can better embed YIAs, further rights-based policymaking and ensure that decisions affecting young people adequately consider their experiences and perspectives

Engage youth sector expertise in the delivery of youth engagement work

In a recent report on rights-based youth engagement, we warned against tokenism and made positive suggestions around how it can be avoided (see Farquhar & Wotherspoon, 2026). We believe that efforts to avoid tokenism are enhanced when decision-makers engage the expertise of the youth sector. Those in the youth sector have significant knowledge and experience in delivering meaningful youth engagement work, and this should be sought out and acted upon by decision-makers.

A Final Word

AYAC hopes this report contributes to a rebalancing of the debate concerning young people's participation in the labour market so that their status as rights-holders in the workplace is embedded and developed. We further hope that our recommendations go some way to supporting the Australian Government advance its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Young Australians deserve to be free from exploitation at work and to feel confident that their rights are respected and upheld.

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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 focus groups to promote respectful dialogue.
- Emphasized the voluntary nature of participation so that participants did not feel obligated to answer questions.
- Prioritised an open dialogue that gave participants scope to speak to their issues.
- Ensured participants were offered the opportunity to contribute anonymously on a Google Doc should they not wish to share directly in the group.
- Informed participants that they could reach out to AYAC for support through the chat or via email if they found aspects of the research upsetting.

A Rights-Based Approach

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

Methodological Rigour

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

Data Minimisation

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

Data Security

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

Appendix 2 - AYAC Workplace Rights Youth Insight Poll Results

Gender	
Female	46.4%
Male	29.2%
Trans Female	1.8%
Trans Male	2.4%
Non-Binary	1.6%
Other	0.2%
Did not disclose	18.4%
State/Territory	
ACT	3.4%
NSW	35.2%
NT	2.2%
VIC	23%
QLD	13.2%
SA	8.2%
TAS	2.4%
WA	12.4%
Did not disclose	0
Other Demographics	
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	5.2%
Carer	2%
Disabled/Living with a Disability	10.2%
CALD	19.6%
LGBTIQA+	19.6%
Regional, Rural and Remote	20.6%
Working Class Background	30.8%
Other	2.4%
None	36.4%
Did not disclose	0
More needs to be done to educate young people about their workplace rights	
Agree	93.8%
Disagree	2.4%
Not sure	3%
Did not disclose	0.8%

I know... (tick all that apply)	
I know what age you are allowed to start working in my state, and the maximum number of hours I can work.	58%
I know the minimum wage and how to calculate junior rates of pay for different awards	39.4%
I know about what casual loading is and when you are eligible for it	32%
I know how to calculate holiday time	27.4%
I know about health and safety in the workplace	56.8%
I know about protections against bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace	54.6%
I know the rules around what makes a dismissal or being let go from your job unfair and how I can appeal an unfair decision	34.8%
I do not feel I have been educated well enough about any of these	18%
Did not disclose	7.8%
Advocating for your rights in the workplace is usually a challenge for young people	
Agree	86%
Disagree	5.2%
Not sure	7.4%
Did not disclose	1.4%
Where did you find out about your workplace rights (tick all that apply)	
Family	35.6%
Friends	31.4%
Work	27%
School/TAFE/University	35%
Trade Union	8.4%
Fair Work Ombudsman	22%
Australian Government Digital Youth Hub	8.4%
Other Government source	6%
None of the above	6.2%
Did not disclose	18%

