



*Submission to the
Australian Youth Forum
Consultation*

Brotherhood of St Laurence
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Introduction

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the BSL continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty, guided by principles of advocacy, innovation and sustainability. Our work includes direct service provision to people in need, the development of social enterprises to address inequality, research to better understand the causes and effects of poverty in Australia, and the development of policy solutions at both national and local levels.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence values this opportunity to contribute to the consideration of the role and functions of the Australian Youth Forum (AYF).

As stated in Article 12 of the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child, to which Australian is a signatory, children and young people have a right to participate in the decisions that affect them. BSL believes this is true whether the young person will be affected directly as an individual or as members of a wider community. It is also a right that should be afforded to all young people.

We agree with the Government's concern expressed in the discussion paper that the Australian Youth Forum should be inclusive of the voices of young people who face disadvantage. There are several reasons for this:

- The ALP pre election document on Social Inclusion asserts that that having one's voice heard and valued is a key element in achieving social inclusion (Guillard and Wong 2007). Many young people who are disengaged or 'at risk' have valuable insights to contribute to the Australian community and yet their voices and opinions are rarely sought, compounding their exclusion from full participation in society. BSL acknowledges that seeking the opinions of disadvantaged young people can be challenging, and may require creative and flexible approaches. More traditional methods of youth consultation, such as youth parliaments and roundtables, often exclude the participation of disadvantaged young people. However, BSL believes that hearing from those young people who are disadvantaged is both valuable and achievable.
- Providing opportunities for young people to participate in the civic life of their community – to be active citizens – is an important factor in building young people's sense of agency. Social participation in community life has been noted as a key factor in engaging people with employment, family and community as well as enabling the development of transferable work skills (McClure 2000). As such, social participation plays an important role in assisting young people to make a successful transition from school to work. However, while social connectedness has been identified as important to the development of young people, disadvantaged young people have been shown to have unequal access to civic and social engagement when compared to their more advantaged peers (Boese & Scutella 2006).
- Finally, consultation with young people is a crucial prerequisite to ensuring that the policies and services designed by government to assist and support young people, are indeed appropriate, effective and well targeted to maximise the social and economic participation of all young people.

The role of the Australian Youth Forum

As stated in discussion paper, the purpose of the establishment of an Australian Youth Forum is to provide young people and the youth sector with an improved way to influence the policies, programs and services that impact on them. The discussion paper also indicates that young people will have an opportunity to have their voices heard not only by the Minister for Youth but across different government portfolios. BSL supports this purpose.

BSL believes that a primary role of the Australian Youth Forum should be to facilitate consultation between government departments and young people, in a way that is flexible and representative of the voices of all young people.

BSL believes that as well as developing an Australian Youth Forum to hear from young people there must be a commitment from all government departments to actively seek the voices and opinions of young people and to embed this in their consultation processes. This commitment should be based on a set of agreed principles about the value of consulting with young people. This approach should be demonstrated as a whole of government strategy within the planned social inclusion framework. A similar commitment was made by the UK Government, which in 2001 outlined a set of core principles for children and young people's participation in the planning, delivery and evaluation of government policies and services.

BSL believes that as a part of their commitment to hearing from young people, government departments should provide evidence of how young people have contributed to the development and evaluation of policies, programs and services. There should be a commitment to respond to young people's suggestions, either indicating how they will be actioned or outlining why they cannot be actioned. Without this, the AYF risks being seen as tokenistic and viewed with cynicism by the community, particularly by young people themselves. BSL believes that the Australian Youth Forum can play a role in assisting the government to feedback to young people the results of their consultation.

What type of organisation should the AYF be?

BSL believes that the Australian Youth Forum should be an independent peak body outside government. This will allow the AYF to ensure that the issues and solutions that young people believe to be important reach the correct policy and decision-makers in government. The current Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) provides a model of how such a peak body can operate:

- As the recognised national youth peak body AYAC has access to wide and diverse networks of young people and youth service organisations through the state and territory youth peaks and the many national youth organisations that are actively involved with them. Through its connections to state and territory youth peaks and national youth organisations AYAC has a ready-made network of organisations that can assist with engaging young people directly in its consultation processes.
- AYAC has an excellent track record when it comes to youth participation. Young people form a central and key part of AYAC's structure and will continue to do so.
- AYAC understands the importance of engaging with young people whose voices are not so readily heard – Indigenous young people, young people with disabilities, CALD and newly arrived young people, rural, regional and remote young people and same sex attracted youth. Further, AYAC understands that these young people often need greater support to maintain their involvement in youth participation mechanisms.
- BSL welcomes the dual functions of a national youth peak body and a mechanism that enables direct national representation of young people and their issues. We believe these are best delivered by a single organisation sitting outside of government that has a monitoring and lobbying role. This will ensure that the issues and solutions that young people believe to be important reach the correct policy and decision makers in government.

Representation and consultation

The Australian Youth Forum has a responsibility to facilitate opportunities for all young people to have their opinions heard by government, including those who are disadvantaged or disengaged, and who experience barriers to participation. To be able to do this BSL suggests the following:

1. Ensure that the AYF is a high profile organisation

Many young people are unaware that there are opportunities to have their say on matters that are important to them. As well as accessing young people through youth services and schools, it is important that the AYF is a visible high profile organisation which is able to provide many and varied opportunities for young people to get involved and to have their voices heard – not simply through a traditional “youth parliament” method. As many young people are cynical about consultation and are wary of tokenism, the AYF should also be able to provide examples and evidence of the difference that young people have made.

To assist the AYF to have a high visibility to young people, BSL recommend seeking a number of high profile ambassadors for the program who are held in high regard by young people. This would assist in encouraging more young people to get actively engaged. An example of this can be seen in the USA with the Rock the Vote organisation, which encourages young people to register to vote. The profile of the AYF must be maintained through a range of media, including the type of media deemed most appropriate by young people.

2. Ensure the AYF provides disadvantaged young people with opportunities to have a say on specific policies that are of concern to them

While reaching young people who are disadvantaged is challenging, it is important if we are to develop policies, programs and services that truly respond to their needs.

For example, if the government is interested in developing new youth housing policies, programs or services, it make sense to talk to those young people who are at risk of, or have experienced, homelessness. If the government is interested in developing new services for young people at risk of disengaging from education to ensure that they can make a successful transition into work it makes sense to talk to early school leavers about their experiences, and what worked and did not work for them.

Given the chance, many young people will be able to provide useful and valuable solutions and insights to the issue, and will be willing to discuss these with policy makers as it is a topic that has direct relevance to them and their peers. In the process, such involvement has the important outcome of contributing to the agency of disadvantaged youth. However, reaching these young people can be difficult, which is why the method of consultation needs to be sensitive, flexible and respectful.

BSL believes it is important that the AYF has strong connections to organisations that support young people in disadvantaged circumstances such as state youth peaks, multicultural service providers, youth resource centres and youth focused community based services. These organisations can advise on the best way to consult with the young people that they assist, and AYF can then facilitate consultations based on this advice. Some young people may need to be supported by a worker or family member during a consultative process, and this should be appropriately resourced by the AYF.

3. Utilise peer to peer research as a tool for consultation

A valuable consultation method for reaching young people who may be disadvantaged or disengaged is the peer to peer research model. This model involves training young people to develop and implement research with other young people.

Young people are often the subject of adult led and conducted research projects that are intended to guide the development of government policy and services that impact on youth. However, young people are rarely involved in determining what is researched, the research design or how data is collected and disseminated. Young people can be included at a variety of points in the research and

evaluation process, including developing research projects, designing research questions, creating data collection instruments, collecting information, analysing data, presenting findings, and making recommendations for change.

One key benefit of peer to peer research is that young people may be able to talk to disengaged young people whom adult researchers may find difficult to access. In best practice approaches, involving young people in the design and delivery of research activities has the potential to increase the involvement of historically disengaged and underachieving students (Mohamed & Wheeler 2001).

Other identified benefits of peer research include:

- Positive response from research participants to research methods and richer information supplied.
- Positive effect on the design of the research including framing the research questions, techniques, wording and research mechanism.
- More innovative and relevant use of consultation methods, for example through youth friendly web-based social networks such as My Space.
- Positive outcomes for the youth researchers including but not limited to the technical knowledge and skills obtained.
- Positive peer role modelling for other young people and increased youth mentoring and informal sharing of insights among researchers' own peer groups.

An example of a recent peer research project is the *Youth Voice: Peer Research into Youth Transitions*. During this project, youth researchers gained increased awareness of their own pathways and transitions as well as a heightened awareness of the importance of education and training (The Youth Collaboration 2007).

The functions of the Australian Youth Forum

To be a robust and meaningful organisation that truly engaged all young people BSL believes that the Australian Youth Forum should have the following functions:

- Provide opportunities for young people to discuss issues of concern and new ideas with policy makers through both electronic and face-to-face consultation. These may be youth specific consultations or adult/youth collaborative consultations.
- Be resourced to be able to respond to a range of government department requests to organize specific consultations with groups/cohorts of young people in the development of new programs, policies and services. The methodology may be through direct consultation or through peer to peer research in conjunction with organisations such as the Australian Youth Research Centre, and the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.
- Provide expert facilitation of consultations in a manner that is flexible enough to engage young people from all backgrounds. In deciding how to do this, it is important that the AYF talks to young people to get their advice on how they want to be consulted. Consultation methods may be formal or informal.
- Provide leadership opportunities for young people from different backgrounds, for example, by training young people as peer to peer researchers or facilitators.
- Link in and provide leadership to youth peaks, local and state governments across Australia to assist them in providing opportunities for young people to have a say on state and local government policies.
- To advocate for, assist with and support the development of policy on issues affecting young people and the youth affairs field, and to provide policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to Governments and the broader community
- To promote the well-being of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged.

Priority Issues

BSL has identified a number of issues as being among the important priorities that need to be addressed if young people are to achieve full inclusion and participation in society. These issues have been identified in consultation with young people, youth workers, and through our own research projects such as the *Life Chances* longitudinal study and *the Brotherhood's Social Barometer – Challenges Facing Australia's Youth*, and through the development and delivery of services such as the Transitions Workers in Schools Project, and Parents as Career Transitions Support. The issues identified include:

- The high cost of living faced by many young people including transport, the impact of education and training costs including tertiary education, and the lack of available low cost rental housing for young people, which in combination exacerbate the exclusion of young people in disadvantaged circumstances
- The current fragmented system of information, advice and welfare support for young people to assist them in making a successful transition through school and into their working lives, especially for young people who lack parental support, or who are otherwise socially isolated.
- Young people have indicated a wish to have access to more education around life skills, and including improved access to fun activities in their communities, which strengthen their confidence and self esteem.
- BSL also believes that Australia needs to develop a more inclusive education system that values vocational pathways and a wider variety of learning models such as applied and student-centred learning. A more inclusive, responsive and supportive education system would better engage young people who may face learning difficulties or who are at risk of disengaging from mainstream compulsory education in its current form.

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