



# Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is the national voice representing young people aged 12-25 years and the sector that supports them.

AYAC represents a growing membership of State and Territory youth peak bodies, national youth organisations, researchers, policy makers and young people themselves, who work with AYAC to create an Australian community that supports and promotes the positive development of young people.

AYAC aims to:

- Provide a body broadly representative of the issues and interests of young people and the youth affairs field in Australia
- Advocate for a united Australia which respects and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, promotes human rights, and provides justice for all
- Represent the rights and interests of young people in Australia, at both a national and an international level
- Promote the elimination of poverty and to promote the well being of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged
- Recognise the diversity of Australian society, to promote the cultural, social, economic, political, environmental and spiritual interests and participation of young people in all aspects of society
- Advocate for, assist with and support the development of policy positions on issues affecting young people and the youth affairs field, and to provide policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to governments and the broader community
- Facilitate co-ordination and co-operation within the youth affairs field AYAC and its members are committed to working for and with young people and seek to ensure they have access to mechanisms, which allow them get involved in decisions about issues that affect them in the Australian community.

Sara Edson  
Secretary  
Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education system  
Standing Committee on Education and Employment  
<< by email >>

Dear Sara,

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House Standing Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry into Technical and Further Education system.

Given the building block TAFE represents for so many young Australians in their path to opportunity and responsibility, TAFE's success is so important to the success of young Australians, and this nation as a whole.

This joint submission has been prepared in collaboration with:

- Youth Action (NSW)
- Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia
- Youth Network of Tasmania
- Youth Affairs Council of South Australia
- Youth Coalition of the ACT
- Youth Affairs Network Queensland

In particular, AYAC would like to acknowledge the Youth Action's significant input into this submission.

We hope this submission informs a plan for TAFE that will help more young Australians, particularly the most vulnerable, to overcome barriers to education.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information or advice.

Sincerely

**Joshua Genner**  
**Deputy Director – Young People**

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

# Introduction

In response to this Inquiry, AYAC believes that there are some fundamental principles that should underpin the funding and provision of education to all young people, but particularly disadvantaged students throughout Australia. We believe that as the primary recipients and key stakeholders in education, it is vital that young people should have the opportunity to be consulted, in order to gather their views on education policy and any changes to TAFE and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector nationally.

In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, young people have the right to be directly engaged in decisions that affect them. As young people have the most to gain when it comes to any reforms to education funding, AYAC strongly urges the Australian Government to be a world leader in delivering quality education enriched through meaningful and ongoing engagement of young people. Furthermore, there are significant benefits for decision-makers in engaging young people in policy-making processes, to properly ensure that policies accurately meet the real needs of young people. Also, young people can “encourage organisations and government bodies to think laterally about how to solve complex problems”.<sup>1</sup>

When AYAC consulted young people in 2011 about education funding, one young person told us:

*“Young people have more to say than is generally believed. A student, if asked about decisions that could affect them, could supply a lot of helpful information.”*

Young Australians are routinely under-consulted on policy matters, including those that directly affect them. Young people continue to report that when it comes to input in school decision-making, “adults discourage their input and fail to give weight to their opinions”.<sup>2</sup> There is mounting evidence that youth involvement in the development and delivery of policies and strategies increases the relevance and effectiveness of the implementation of services.<sup>3</sup>

AYAC therefore calls for young people to be given appropriate recognition as a key stakeholder within the education system and their perspectives to be given equal value with other stakeholder groups in this TAFE inquiry process. This process must use best-practice methods for youth engagement, including consulting with young people in spaces they feel comfortable and ensuring consultation has clear questions to ensure young people are able to provide valuable responses. This must also be sufficiently funded to ensure consultation reaches marginalised young people who do not engage with traditional consultation processes.

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<sup>1</sup> Comrie, C., 2010, ‘Where are you going with that?: Maximising Young People’s Impact On Organisational & Public Policy’, The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, p4

<sup>2</sup> Child Rights Australia, 2005, ‘The Non-Government Report on the Implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Australia’, The National Children’s and Youth Law Centre and Defence for Children International (Australia), p10

<sup>3</sup> Inspire Foundation, 2010, ‘Submission to the review of the Commission for Children and Young People Act’, Inspire Foundation

## What disadvantaged young people need in an education system

When it comes to the delivery of VET and TAFE programs, policy discussion must particularly consider young people with the most to lose from cuts to VET funding, all young people with a background of disadvantage - remoteness, disability and mental health issues, Indigenous heritage, newly arrived youth, and entrenched welfare dependency. Well resourced TAFE and VET programs provide significant savings to governments at all levels, as the improvements in life outcomes for these vulnerable groups result in major reductions in their reliance on government services. For young people with high needs, a one-size-fits all service delivery model is not adequate. The education system needs to significantly increase investment in flexible education programs and service delivery both within and outside of schools.

Overall, Australia enjoys a relatively high standard of education. However, where we lag behind is in equity in education - the ability to offer *all* young people access to quality education regardless of means.<sup>4</sup> The differences in academic performance between the highest and lowest performing students are significant and growing and more dependent on the influence of socio economic status, family and social background than in other developed countries. Only 74% of students from low socio economic backgrounds complete Year 12 or equivalent compared with 94% of students from high socio economic backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> In Australia, socio-economic background has a greater impact on young people's educational outcomes than in other high performing OECD countries, such as Finland and Canada.<sup>1</sup> Students whose mothers have low levels of education are more prevalent in disadvantaged schools and students who attend disadvantaged schools underperform compared to those schools in the top quartile by an average of 55 points in the PISA reading scale – the equivalent of well over a year of schooling<sup>6</sup>. The gap in performance between schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged students and the rest has also widened, and therefore it is no surprise to find that in the last decade the achievement gap between higher socio-economic students and lower socio-economic students has widened.<sup>7</sup>

Under recent Australian Government policy proposals, schools will face increased pressure to be accountable for their performance. Schools deemed to be underperforming will be placed under increased government scrutiny and face greater difficulty in gaining funding. Such policies only exacerbate the widening gap between public and private schools, and create an environment where better students will be drawn to schools that are better funded. Public schools are therefore left with a rising proportion of slower-learning, less disciplined students (notwithstanding the fact that such students

<sup>4</sup> Argy, F. 2007, Educational Inequalities in Australia, *The New Critic*, Issue 5, University of Western Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Source: COAG Reform Council, Education 2011: Comparing performance across Australia Report to the Council of Australian Governments, 28 September 2012, p 47.

<sup>6</sup> OECD Report 2012, *Education at a glance: 2012 Australia*, OECD.

<sup>7</sup> Horin, A. 2007, *Haves or havenots, that is the question for education*, The Sydney Morning Herald.

are strongly linked with locality-based socio-economic demographics) who are much more likely to drop out of school before finishing year 12<sup>8</sup>.

These factors lead to a greater need to expand alternative and flexible learning options for students who are struggling to receive adequate support in an under-resourced public school system. An expansion of flexible learning programs would improve educational accessibility among students, especially those who are disadvantaged, and decrease the likelihood of these students not continuing education and training in the future. More flexible and innovative education programs would also help reduce the gap in achievement between lower socio-economic and higher socio-economic students by providing disadvantaged students with specialised assistance to help them become educated and finish school even after they have dropped out of mainstream schooling. From a national perspective, under-achievement stemming from socio-economic barriers represents a huge waste of potential human capital, and flexible and innovative education programs are an effective way of reducing this.

For Indigenous young people, in particular, research indicates that they need to be supported in 'a culturally relevant learning and training environment in order to maximise their individual and community potential.'<sup>9</sup> Many young Indigenous people also do not speak English as a first language and as such are often excluded from mainstream curricula. Reports show 'that programs to improve Indigenous education should address students' attitudes, engagement, motivation and beliefs.'<sup>10</sup>

It is similarly vital that newly arrived young people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds have access to appropriately targeted, high quality educational and vocational support during their initial settlement period. The absence of intensive English language support for refugee and newly arrived young people can result in young people within this group leaving the formal education system with insufficient literacy and language skills. They are then unable to participate productively in the workforce or pursue further education and/or training. This is exacerbated by recent cuts to intensive English language and literacy courses by State governments.

For young people excluded from formal schooling, the way to re-energise them on education may only be through flexible education programs that are attached to TAFE and VET providers. And many will only be able to finish Year 12 through TAFE. A well-resourced vocational education system is therefore vital for these groups.

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<sup>8</sup> Wilson, J. 2009, Adolescent resistance narratives in a satirical schoolyard: the case of Summer Heights High, *Journal of Australian Studies*, v.33, n. 3, pp. 305-316

<sup>9</sup> Pitman et al, 2002, 'The Senior Certificate: A New Deal', Queensland Government, p147

<sup>10</sup> ACER, 2010, 'Turning up and tuning in key to Indigenous education', Wednesday, Media release 19 May 2010, <http://www.acer.edu.au/media/turning-up-and-tuning-in-key-to-indigenous-education/> accessed 25/3/11

# What the TAFE sector means for young people

In Australia, around 21 per cent of young people do not complete secondary school.<sup>11</sup> Research shows that people who do not complete Year 12 are much more likely to experience extended periods of unemployment or to remain outside the labour force in the first seven years after leaving school, than those who completed high school.<sup>12</sup> Based on various indicators, early school leavers are generally worse off than others in later life.<sup>13</sup> Young people who fail to complete Year 12 are more likely to work in casual or part time positions, and have a reduced income over their life span.<sup>14</sup> For those who leave school early and end up facing long periods of unemployment, there are serious effects on health, family relationships, child development, criminal behaviour and other social outcomes, so these impacts have a reinforcing nature that can lead to entrenched disadvantage.<sup>15</sup>

In AYAC's recent research report "*Beyond Learn or Earn*"<sup>16</sup> - which investigated the best policy responses to early school leaving - young people who had dropped out of high school were found to have faced a range of barriers that prevent them from succeeding in conventional schooling – bullying, family problems, mental and physical health concerns, entrenched poverty, unstable home lives. Many came from disadvantaged backgrounds and were therefore far more likely to disengage from formal education. Many of these young people left school early out of frustration due to poor literacy and numeracy, as well as strong dissatisfaction with a school system that was inflexible towards their needs.

Many (if not all early school leavers) need flexible and inclusive learning models connected to schools that are accessible to all young people who need them. A third of the young people in the AYAC study who had disengaged from education were accessing specialised programs that were tied to TAFE and VET courses to help them overcome barriers and re-engage with education. One young person put it like this:

*"I was going downhill for a while with a lot of outside problems. If it wasn't for this flexible learning centre and its services I'd probably be in jail or dead. If it wasn't for these types of services that are willing to help people in my situation it could've been a lot worse, so I'm lucky*

<sup>11</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, March 2011. *Australian Social Trends: Year 12 Attainment*, Australia, p 1. [www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features40Mar+2011](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features40Mar+2011).

<sup>12</sup> Lamb, S., McKenzie, P., 2001. *Patterns of Success and Failure in the Transition from School to Work in Australia*, LSAY Research Report No. 18, ACER, Melbourne, pp. 25, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, J., 2009. *Stories of early school leaving: Pointers for policy and practice*, Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Victoria, p 11.

<sup>14</sup> Levin, H., 2010. "Why should countries care? The high economic and social costs of education failure", as cited in Deloitte, September 2012. *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, Hands On Learning report, Deloitte Access Economics Pty Ltd, p 9.

<sup>15</sup> Deloitte, September 2012. *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, Hands On Learning report, Deloitte Access Economics Pty Ltd, p 11.

<sup>16</sup> Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, November 2012, "Beyond Learn or Earn: Young People Tell How Policy Can Better Support Those Who Need it Most", AYAC.

*that I'm still here... This (flexible learning) school has changed my life dramatically in every way possible."*

All the young people involved in alternative schooling spoke highly about their experience. Young people loved the flexibility of this environment that stood in stark contrast to the rigidity of conventional high school. Some students were able to negotiate their hours, school days and subjects, and most learning programs were able to cater to individual circumstances and interests. Along with their VET courses, very basic skills were taught and self-confidence developed as well as their resilience to dealing with problems and barriers to participation.

Another young person said:

*"I've been here I've probably done more work here in the short time I've been here than in my mainstream school. There's no deadline, they don't say if it's not in by this date you're going to fail sort of thing, there's no stress about that. It's 'take your time, if you need help I'm here'. That's amazing, that's what a lot of kids need."*

Most young people are located in schools where the dominant pathway is university study. But for a large group of young people who end up as early school leavers, there needs to be a greater emphasis on applied skills, practical learning, employability and life skills in secondary education curricula. TAFE provides education and training for the many thousands of young people who rely on TAFE for second-chance education, literacy and numeracy support, and the opportunity to gain skills for employment.

Funding cuts to the VET sector in Victoria, NSW and Queensland mean that the most vulnerable young people – particularly early school leavers, young women, and those living in rural and regional areas<sup>17</sup> – will be hit the hardest. Increased fees, fewer courses, and inadequate support for barriers like homelessness, mental health issues, and difficulties with literacy and numeracy will deter many disadvantaged young people from gaining new skills.

One in four young Australian are not in work or study<sup>18</sup> with this figure having risen from 23.7 per cent in 2008 to 27.5 per cent last year.<sup>19</sup> That is: 620,000 young Australians not engaged with vital stepping stones in those critical years for starting a successful working life and achieving the financial security and personal stability that goes with it. Half a million young people are also currently at risk of leaving school without the skills and knowledge to

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<sup>17</sup> Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, February 2013, "Vocational Education and Training (VET) and young Victorians: a way forward", YACVic.

<sup>18</sup> Source: COAG Reform Council, Education 2011: Comparing performance across Australia Report to the Council of Australian Governments, 28 September 2012, p 32; indicates that the proportion of 18-24 year-olds in 2011 fully engaged in full-time education and work was 72.5% (source: (2012) ABS Survey of Education and Work 2008–2011). ("Fully engaged" is defined as full time employment, full time education or training at or above Certificate III, both part time employment and part time education/training, or both full time employment and full time education/training). Moreover, the number of young people (18-25 years old) fully engaged in work and education has dropped by 3.6% since 2008. Source: ABS (2012) Survey of Education and Work 2008–2011.

<sup>19</sup> Source: COAG Reform Council, Education 2011: Comparing performance across Australia Report to the Council of Australian Governments, 28 September 2012, p 32



participate effectively in a globalised economy.<sup>20</sup> These inadequate rates of disengagement is extremely concerning, with a central part of the solution being innovative and flexible educational interventions that focus on skills development of young people that have been failed by conventional schooling.

Funding allocation mechanisms need to ensure the most disadvantaged and disengaged groups of young people can access an education system that is flexible and youth-friendly, in order to meet their complex needs and allow them to receive a superior education that effectively prepares them to thrive – both in school and beyond school. TAFE provides accessible education and training for many disadvantaged young Australians, with a significant proportion of TAFE students aged 15-24.

Anecdotal evidence gathered by AYAC shows that specialist and generalist job services providers are having difficulty finding appropriate training for young people. Certificate 2 courses are disappearing and Certificate 1 courses are now almost non-existent. Given the strict activity requirements for income support payments under the Federal Government's Learn or Earn program that require a young person to be enrolled in a training course within a short period of time following a referral from Centrelink, and given that relevant training courses often do not start at an appropriate time, the young person will lose their benefits unless they enroll in what may be useless and irrelevant training. AYAC's members have told us that greater investment is needed in more Certificate 1 and 2 courses so that young people can enter onto positive pathways towards employment.

## TAFE programs that work

Many flexible and innovative programs that support disadvantaged young people to move towards independence offer VET and TAFE accredited Certificate 1 and 2 courses, that are essential to re-engage young people with learning.

There are a number of particular programs around Australia that combine specialised supports for vulnerable young people with VET accredited courses. We offer three examples here.

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<sup>20</sup> In 2009, an average of one in seven students performed below the proficiency baseline for all PISA domains compared with one in eight students in 2000. If this ratio were to apply to the current total student population, some 500,000 students would leave school without the skills and knowledge needed to participate effectively in a globalised society. Data sourced from: Thomson, S., et. al., (2011), "Challenges for Australian education: results from PISA 2009: the PISA 2009 assessment of students' reading, mathematical and scientific literacy", Australian Council for Education Research accessed at <http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/PISA-2009-Report.pdf>

### **Case study 1:**

*Babymum* is based in Launceston, Tasmania and assists young mothers who are first-time mothers under the age of 21 years with accommodation, education and support in a home-like environment. The young women they support have stopped their education in order to have a baby or have been unable to continue in education when they have become pregnant, with some having only had a short and interrupted time in education. Some may not want to continue their education as they do not value it and would not benefit from traditional formal education. Others may want to continue but would not fit into the traditional courses being offered nor would they find many areas of study relevant to their current lives. In order to help these young mothers reengage with study and work, Babymum formed an association with Launceston College to accredit their Life Choices Program, and other short courses and informal sessions offered by Babymum. Formal recognition of these essential courses via the VET certificate courses and the TQA courses offered at Launceston College are beneficial to young parents in their parenting roles and also in their future job search.

### **Case Study 2:**

*Steps to the Future* is an innovative project based in Glenorchy, Tasmania specifically for young mothers aged 17 – 25 years and aims to provide positive, supported and flexible pathways to personal learning and development, formal education and training, work opportunities, and enhanced health literacy and wellbeing for young mothers and their children. Specifically tailored programs and other activities to develop participant's literacy skills and life-long learning. Steps to the Future delivers a range of tailored individual and group programs to young mothers that can be run flexibly, entered at any time, and which would allow participants to choose the level of engagement they want to have with the program and its activities. More substantial accredited training opportunities are also offered to young parents via a partnership with a local registered training organisation. These include: childcare, first aid training, customer service, public speaking, report writing, OHS, and risk planning and management.

What young single parents said about their needs:

*“We need skills – it’s hard to get back into work after having a baby and being out of it and people discriminate against you because you have a child.”*

*“I want help to decide what’s important for me to do – for example, I like art but can I ever make a living out of art? Should I do something else for a career.”*

### Case study 3:

*Creative Youth Initiative* is a unique service based in Surry Hills, Sydney that provides free creative programs for young people aged 16 - 25 who are facing many and varied challenges in their lives, such as: homelessness, mental health issues, substance abuse, family breakdown, unemployment, and poor educational experiences. *Creative Youth Initiative* programs develop the young person's creativity through visual arts and music. With the vital assistance of a support worker, this program also develops their self-expression, esteem, communication skills and provides positive learning experiences and educational qualifications. Creative Youth Initiative offers two TAFE accredited courses:

- A 20 week Certificate 1 music course where students learn to compose, perform and record their own music and also learn an instrument,
- A 6 month visual arts program, which allows students to explore and experiment with various mediums including painting, sketching, sculpture, life drawing, spray art and graphic design.

One student who left school after years battling learning difficulties said of the Creative Youth Initiative program:

*“I’ve always like, back in my head, I’ve always seen, I’ve always loved music, I’ve always loved and wanted to learn piano and I always wanted to do these things and I never have. I started learning to play guitar in high school but that didn’t work out because I’m an idiot and I didn’t do it properly and shit happens. I screwed up again, back then, but that’s in the past so yes now I definitely yeah, I feel like I can really go forward with this.”*

Programs like these that are linked to VET courses can achieve very positive outcomes for young people who have disengaged and see them move onto pathways to paid work.

## Meaningful training options for young people

It is critical that young people who have disengaged from traditional and conventional schooling are assisted to access training that they are interested in and which they find meaningful. Young people who find what they are learning interesting are more likely to complete training than are those who find it irrelevant. Disengaged young people need a range of training choices that match their strengths and interests with a greater emphasis on applied skills, practical learning, employability and life skills.

One young person in AYAC's *'Beyond Learn or Earn'* study who was undertaking a flexible program of study said:

*"What's great is going at your own pace with school work, and having creative and practical subjects such as cooking."*

Training that works for young school leavers must also be appropriate for the age group, suit the learning styles of individual learners, and be delivered in non-formal education settings. In many cases, TAFE and VET providers can offer these kinds of courses. Governments that are interested in improving disengagement rates must ensure access to a variety of basic training courses at TAFE and VET providers – like literacy and numeracy training or creative arts courses - to cater for all young people in need.

## The role of TAFE and VET in youth workforce development

The role of healthcare and social assistance in the Australian economy is significant and rising, with over 11% of Australia's workforce currently employed in this sector.<sup>21</sup> A large proportion of these workers are employed in the social welfare sector. In 2013, AYAC surveyed youth workers around Australia, asking them what qualifications they held. The results showed that nationally, around 40% of youth workers noted having a certificate or diploma level TAFE or VET qualification.<sup>22</sup>

This demonstrates the significant role TAFE and VET plays, not only in supporting vulnerable and marginalised young people to engage with education, but also in supporting these groups through the training and professional development of workers that support these groups.

AYAC believes that a well funded and supported TAFE and VET sector is vital in supporting both productivity and employment expansion through the provision of qualifications that are mostly not offered through other tertiary education options.

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<sup>21</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistic, January 2013, 'Employment in Australian Industry', <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1301.0~2012~Main%20Features~Employment%20in%20Australian%20Industry~241>

<sup>22</sup> Dr Elizabeth Reimer, 2013, 'AYAC National Snapshot of Youth Work 2013' (unpublished), Australian Youth Affairs Coalition.

## Conclusion

In AYAC's 'Beyond Learn or Earn' report, one young person said:

*“Education is a right that everyone deserves - it's too bad that more effort isn't put into making it as accessible as possible.”*

AYAC is concerned that changes to the VET system will have a disproportionate impact on young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and AYAC warns that disadvantaged young people will be locked into disadvantage unless state governments reverse their plans to cut funding to the VET courses and staff at VET providers. AYAC would instead like to see that any reforms to the VET sector ensure that disadvantaged groups of young people do not miss out on critically needed courses and that any policy change be evidence-based, and include significant consultation with young people from these groups.

Australia's prosperity depends on the success of young Australians, and investing in their education is critical to Australia's success. The development of skills in this current generation of young people is most critical now, given the looming demands of an ageing population. If we are not investing in our young Australians now, if they do not succeed as a generation, the economic and social costs will be crippling. A well-resourced VET sector is an essential part of this investment in Australia's future.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: NOUS Group. Schooling challenges & opportunities: A Report for the Review of Funding for Schooling Panel, August 2011, p 5.