

I couch-surfed across Australia to talk to 4,000 young people about what matters to them

By Amos Washington. Originally published on ABC.net.au 1 Apr 2019

Amos Washington was the 2018 Australian Youth Representative to the United Nations.

Last year I spent six months travelling the country seeking an answer to one question: What would Australia look like if young people had a greater say?

I couch-surfed my way through every state and territory. I visited vocational training centres and universities, community organisations, and juvenile detention centres, in cities and in remote communities. I ran 152 consultations with more than 4,000 young people. And I listened.

My favourite quote from the thousands I compiled is this: "If I could influence one thing in my community, I would try to show that youth are an incredible, diverse group of people who deserve attention and the chance to influence change."



Young people are more engaged with politics than the broader community realises.

(ABC Radio Adelaide: Malcolm Sutton)

If there was just one lesson I took away from my consultations, it was that young people are far more passionate, engaged, and community-minded than the broader community realises.

WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW

In consultations, I would get my peers to write down issues on butcher's paper that affect young people in their community. On most occasions, young people would fill several pages with issues until there was little space left. I'd then ask them to circle the issues that affect the broader community too.

Most of the time, young people would circle the entire page.



Mental health was the number one issue of concern to young people. (sanja gjen-ero, file photo: www.sxc.hu)

Mental health was raised as a top issue of concern in almost every consultation, reflecting the findings of research and polling released by other organisations last year. It was followed by discrimination and inequality, education, alcohol and other drugs and personal growth and identity.

When asked why they did so, hundreds of young people said the same thing: "Because youth issues are community issues." It seems almost too obvious but this is this far too often overlooked.

There is a misconception that young people are waiting in the wings, yet to experience the real world, but they face the same issues that confront the rest of the community.

We should look to how young people experience these issues because their experiences and perspectives are unique and varied. Policymakers cannot get the full picture if we don't listen.

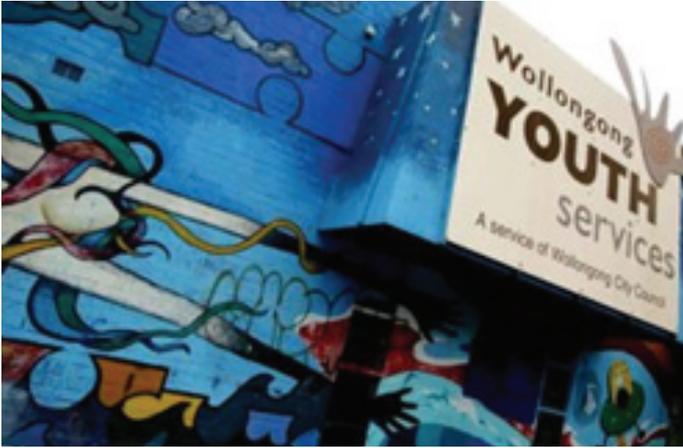
I spoke with a young person in regional Western Australia who was raising her younger siblings while attempting to survive on a disability pension. A young Aboriginal woman in Tasmania expressed sadness that she hadn't learnt about Tasmanian Aboriginal culture and history in school, and how this lack of awareness impacts her life.

In NSW, a young Muslim woman spoke of the racial

abuse hurled at her on trains and out of passing cars. Young Muslim men told me of the prejudice they faced at airports and in security lines.

THE WIFI AT THE SERVO

An entire high school class in a remote town — when asked what recreational services were provided to them as young people — replied in unison: “the wifi at the servo”. They believed that in the eyes of their local policymakers their needs didn’t even exist.



Young people are concerned about a lack of services focused on their needs.

Dozens of young people shared their concerns about a lack of mental health services in their community that were accessible and tailored to their generation.

Young people living in juvenile detention felt as though there were no resources to help them on their feet once they left the detention centre.

Young people have the key to implementing better policy, because our experiences of community issues are the missing piece of the puzzle. We need to include young people in policy decision-making, because young people are visionaries.

We can enrich our policy conversations if we provide young people with a seat at the table.

After the listening tour, I spent six weeks at the United Nations where I delivered a speech to the third committee of the General Assembly on behalf of young Australians. Upon my return I delivered a report summarising my findings, which was tabled in the House of Representatives in December.

LET’S TALK ABOUT VOTING

In the consultation report I provided eight recommendations. It was impossible to distil all the innovative policy solutions I heard throughout the year and instead chose eight recommendations that came directly from young Australians.

The first recommendation is to lower the voting age to 16.

Young people are key stakeholders in our society. They are not merely future participants in Australia — they

are fully-fledged members of society now. Young people are wholly capable and deserving of full political participation.

It is a mistake to confuse a lack of understanding about our electoral system with political disengagement. Just because young people do not all know the intricacies of the vote counting process, it does not follow that they lack political opinions that deserve respect and attention.

We certainly hold young people to a higher standard than the rest of the community in this regard. It’s important that in considering a lowered voting age we provide an increased and mandatory focus on civics education in all schools to equip young people with knowledge about the electoral system.

Australia is one of the only democratic countries in the world to have compulsory voting, and we enjoy high rates of political participation. This culture of political participation was seen even during the non-binding, non-compulsory marriage equality postal survey, which resulted in a 79.5 per cent turnout.

Maintaining a culture of compulsory voting is important if the voting age was lowered.

However, I suggest that we do not fine 16-and-17-year-olds for failing to vote.



Young people want a greater say in politics. Lowering the voting age may be the answer. (triple j)

We live in a society that restricts the autonomy of young people. By fining under 18s for not voting, we would be punishing them for actions that are not always within their control. However, we must ensure that all 16-and-17-year-olds who wish to vote have the means to do so—not just inner-city young people who already receive far more opportunities to have their perspectives heard than their rural and remote peers.

A young woman from Port Augusta told me she felt like her peers were only in the “peripheral vision” of our leaders.

Perhaps lowering the voting age to 16 will provide our policymakers with the new pair of glasses they so desperately need.