

Youth Advisory Council

***Submission
for the Inquiry into the
Educational Achievement Gap
in the ACT***

**To the Standing Committee on Education,
Training and Youth Affairs**

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Introduction

The ACT Youth Advisory Council (YAC) consists of 15 young people aged between 12 and 25 years who are from a range of diverse backgrounds. The Council consults with young people in the ACT and provides advice to the Minister for Children and Young People and the broader ACT Government on issues relating to youth in the ACT (see Appendix for more information).

On Thursday 25 June 2009, the Legislative Assembly for the ACT referred to the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs for inquiry and report into the extent of existing socio-economic differences in educational engagement and achievement in all ACT government and non-government schools.

In response to the invitation to make a submission regarding this inquiry, YAC wishes to present the following submission on the educational gap in the ACT to the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs. The Terms of Reference¹ for the Inquiry outlined five specific reference areas, of which YAC found two to be within their scope of research and consultation. These are:

- Educational engagement and outcomes for students of all interests and abilities, with particular reference to any implications of cultural background, including Indigenous and ESL students.
- Current programs and initiatives designed to address educational achievement gaps, including resources allocated and relevant experiences in other jurisdictions.

YAC aims to represent the views of young people in the ACT on these two areas (hereon referred to as ‘focus areas’) in the following submission. Information was drawn from the Council’s wide external network, which includes schools, youth support organisations, and members of the general public, as well as its own internal network of diverse council members. The council itself includes a balance of age, gender, life experience and representation of young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

This submission is comprised of two main areas of research, and has been accordingly divided into two sections.

Section 1 consists of the results from an online survey for young people in the ACT that was designed to address YAC’s two focus areas from the Terms of Inquiry, and includes recommendations to address the issues raised regarding the existing socio-economic differences in educational engagement and achievement in all ACT government and non-government school.

Section 2 includes information relevant to the two focus areas that have been gathered from the Council’s previous consultations with young people on the topic of ‘Increasing the School Leaving Age’.

Section 1 – Consultation via Online Survey

1.1 – Consultation Process

In order to engage young people in the issues raised by the Inquiry, YAC designed a survey to gain a perspective on the general views of young people in the ACT regarding YAC's focus areas from the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry. The survey was hosted online by SurveyMonkey² and a link to the survey was distributed amongst YAC's external network, including schools in the ACT, the Youth InterACT³ consultation register, and various youth support organisations. Members of the Council also distributed a link to the survey within their individual networks.

The survey was originally made available for a period of one month, starting from the 14th September and ending on 14th October. However, numerous technical issues resulted in only 23 responses at the time of closing of the survey. In a final effort to gain more responses, YAC extended the period of the survey for seven days until the 25th October and redistributed the link to the survey. An additional 29 responses were received in the extension period, increasing the total number of responses to 52.

1.2 – Survey Results

The 52 respondents of the survey were from a range of cultural backgrounds, including Australian, Indigenous Australian, Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and South African. The ages of the respondents varied from 13 to 25 years, with the majority studying in Secondary and Tertiary Institutions, or in the work force.

On statistical analysis, it was found that 92% of the respondents wished to seek further education beyond their current education engagement. Those that did not were either currently in the work force or studying at a Tertiary Institution. Of the respondents that expressed a wish to seek further education, 77% indicated that they would like to engage in Tertiary education.

The needs and interests of the respondents that wish to seek further education varied from academic to artistic areas, and included fields of study such as mathematics, information technology, science, event management, politics, music, education, indigenous affairs, humanities, and linguistics. However, several respondents also indicated that they were unsure of what areas of study they wish to pursue in the future.

While most respondents stated that they felt that their educational needs and interests can be met with the current education system in the ACT, five respondents indicated that their educational needs and interests could not be satisfied. The reasons that these respondents gave for their responses were

- there is insufficient catering for interests specialist courses;
- there very limited opportunities certain fields of study, and;
- there is not enough rural access.

1.2 – Survey Results (cont)

Five respondents also indicated that they felt that their cultural background disadvantaged them in terms of educational opportunities. The reasons that these respondents gave for their responses were

- unsupported transition into a different education system;
- difficulties due to English as a second language.

Furthermore, eleven respondents indicated that they do not generally feel that the current education system in the ACT sufficiently caters for a range of students from different backgrounds and with different educational needs and interests. Reasons that respondents gave for this were

- secondary students are not given much choice with the subjects they studied;
- higher education is aimed much more towards academics rather than the arts;
- more support is needed for students from a lower socio-economic background;
- more support is needed for students with a disability;
- many students cannot gain the resources needed for their studies, and;
- content being taught is too vague and general rather than specific and useful.

These respondents also commented that

- more emphasis should be put on the benefits of learning a second language
- more emphasis should be placed on the importance of tertiary education
- education needs to become more affordable to all students
- Government and non government schools both have disadvantages relative to each other

However, those respondents that indicated that they do generally feel that the current education system in the ACT sufficiently caters for a range of students from different backgrounds and with different educational needs and interests provided the following positive comments about education in the ACT:

- there is a variety of options available for study at the tertiary level
- ACT teachers are well-qualified
- the system is based on educational merit and not cultural background
- students of all cultural backgrounds are offered the same opportunities

1.3 – Proposed Recommendations

The most significant theme regarding socio-economic differences that arises from the results of the survey is the expenses related to education. Although services such as Centrelink⁴ are available to financially disadvantaged students, further subsidy should be provided to students seeking further education. As one respondent stated, “people should not be in debt for years just from studying.”

YAC thus proposes the recommendation that additional support services are implemented to financially assist students in their pursuit of further studies.

A recurring issue also identified in the survey is the lack of catering for specific interests through the availability of specialist courses. The issue of the lack of subject choice in secondary education was also identified by a respondent who stated, “school seems pointless at times because you are not getting what you want out of it.”

YAC thus proposes the recommendation that consultation with educational institutions be made regarding the offer of a wider range of courses to cater for a larger range of interests for students in the ACT.

On the contrary, the issue of too much responsibility in selecting life choices at a young age was also identified by a respondent, who stated

“I think that many students are not ready for the lack of discipline and the freedoms of the ACT College system when they reach Year 11. My observation has been that while focussed and academic students succeed, many students are not responsible and mature enough at age 15-16 to be in a system that is more like university. While it is helpful for students to have a transition stage and rely on teachers less, sadly many students use their new freedoms unwisely and need greater structure.”

YAC thus proposes the recommendation that compulsory professional advice is given to every student regarding their individual choices in their educational pursuits.

Finally, despite the existence of current support services for disadvantaged students, such as those with English as their second language, students with disabilities, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the issue of the disadvantage that these students experience was repeatedly mentioned by the respondents.

YAC thus proposes the recommendation that a review of the current support services for disadvantaged students is undertaken through consultation with disadvantaged students, with the possibility of improvements being made to the services.

Section 2 – Relevant Information from Previous Consultations

The following section details information relevant to YAC's focus areas from the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry, and were obtained from young people in the ACT during various previous consultations. The issues raised and the outcomes from these previous consultations provide details as to why young people leave school, what aspects can be improved on in schools and ideas for keeping young people engaged in education.

2.1 – Consultation Groups

The Youth Advisory Council previously held face-to-face consultations with several alternative education institutes in relation to the topic of 'Increasing the school leaving age'. Included in these groups were:

Galilee⁵ – The consensus was that the school leaving age should stay as it is, at 15 years. Students expressed that they wished to finish at least year ten and then enter the workforce, if the school leaving age were to be raised to 17 years (as suggested), they would be 'stuck' in school.

Gugan Gulwan⁶ – Here it was indicated that if the school leaving age were to be raised to 17 years, there would be more incentive for the continuation of their schooling. Students acknowledged the importance of completing their educations and told that classic schooling was not suitable for them due to bullying, behavioural issues and learning difficulties.

Outcomes from Gugan Gulwan:

- There should be flexible learning opportunities for young people who experience learning difficulties; this will enable them to continue in mainstream learning programs.
- Have more than just one youth worker in schools who work with young people not just with crisis matters.

Canberra Institute of Technology⁶ – Students said that they had issues with other students in high school. They suggested that the school leaving age should be raised to 17 years, as people below this age do not have the right level of maturity to fully understand such a drastic decision as stopping their education.

Youth Education Program (YEP) – Young people enrolled in this program identified issues that affect others in mainstream schools. Things such as large classes, moving from class to class, bullying and behavioural issues all need to be addressed. The school leaving age should not be increased as programs such as YEP could become a dumping ground for the 'trouble students'.

Outcomes from Youth Education Program:

- Access to training and education programs needs to be increased. For example: Earlier entry into apprenticeships.
- It is better to enter an alternative educational program such as YEP than to leave school completely. More awareness should be raised about alternative education institutes.

2.2 – Community Forum

On the 24th of September 2008, a community forum was held at Narrabundah College⁸ regarding the topic of ‘Increasing the school leaving age’. Eight different schools were invited and 19 young people from these schools attended. Although the number was smaller than anticipated, the discussion uncovered valuable information concerning the topic of interest.

Ideas imparted by the participating young people with regards to

Raising the school leaving age:

- It would be best if it were compulsory for students to finish education to at least year ten so that they had some form of qualification.
- If students stayed in school until 17 years, there would be more opportunities in the workforce for them.
- Young people who leave school at 15 years should have to begin an apprenticeship/ take up a trade or enrol in alternative education. Keeping them in school against their will would not be beneficial at all.

Issues associated with mainstream school:

- The workload is very stressful.
- Some classes are compulsory that may not be relevant to all students.
- Schools do not promote alternative educations; young people feel as though they have no other choice.

Outcomes from Narrabundah College’s community forum:

- There is a need for different learning and teaching styles to suit all young people.
- Young people who are still in school should be given access to alternative classes to keep an interest in attending school.

- Young people would prefer if the school leaving age stayed at 15 years for 'traditional' learning.
- Students are concerned that if the school leaving age were to be raised to 17 years, students who did not have an interest in being at school would be a distraction to the rest of the class.
- Constructive participation until 17 years such as an apprenticeship, employment or study at an alternative education program was supported.

3.3 – School Leaving Age Survey

A survey in relation to the topic of 'Increasing the school leaving age' was also utilised as a form of consultation. This was provided to schools and accessible through the Youth Interact website. Forty-three young people completed this survey.

Outcomes from the survey:

- Most young people knew that the school leaving age was 15 years.
- The majority of young people suggested the school leaving age remain at 15 years.
- Young people who would prefer not to be in school should be given plenty of information on apprenticeships or further learning that would lead to better employment opportunities and be given better access to trades.

References

1. The Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into the Educational Achievement Gap in the ACT can be found at:
<http://www.parliament.act.gov.au/downloads/terms-of-reference/TORedugap.pdf>
2. SurveyMonkey is a software designed for the creation of online surveys. The website also provides a host for these surveys.
www.surveymonkey.com
3. Youth InterACT is a youth participation initiative launched by the ACT government. More information can be found at:
www.youth.act.gov.au
4. Centrelink is a support agency of the Australian Government. More information can be found at:
www.centrelink.gov.au
5. Galilee is an NPO that support children and young people in the Canberra community. More information can be found at:
www.galilee.org.au
6. Gugan Gulwan is an Aboriginal support service.
7. Canberra Institute of Technology is a vocational training and education establishment in Canberra. More information can be found at:
www.cit.act.edu.au
8. Narrabundah College is a secondary school in the ACT for students in Years 11 and 12. It was chosen as the venue for the forum due to convenience.

Appendix – About YAC

The Youth Advisory Council consists of 15 young people aged between 12 and 25 years from a diverse range of backgrounds. The Council's main role is to advise the Minister for Children and Young People and the broader ACT Government on matters that concern youth in the ACT. Through regular consultation, YAC aims to accurately represent the views of young people on issues relating to youth in the ACT. YAC also aims to promote awareness of these issues within young people, as well as promote community engagement.

YAC forms an integral part of the Youth InterACT initiative of the ACT Government by acting as a readily available body from which the ACT Government can seek advice, as well as a direct link between young people and the Government. Throughout the year, YAC engages young people in the ACT by holding community forums, open meetings, and the annual Youth InterACT Conference during National Youth Week. The Council also engages in the community by participating in community events such as the Canberra Times Fun Run.

More information about YAC can be found at:

http://youth.act.gov.au/cms/index.php?page=youth_council

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