



Inspire Foundation Submission to
**The Legal and Constitutional Committee of the Queensland
Parliament**
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The Inspire Foundation with Contributions by Queensland Reach Out! Youth
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Summary

In Australia:

- An estimated 300,000 young people between the ages of 18 – 25 are not enrolled to vote (Saha et.al, 2005).

Research finds that young Australian are nevertheless active across a broad range of political activities (Vromen, 2003) and want to make a difference in their communities.

- Research has found that youth participation, including volunteering, can help young people to make positive connections with the commonwealth and enhance civic engagement (Flanagan et.al, 1999).
- Education and providing opportunities for young people to understand and be politically engaged contribute significantly to their likelihood of voting (Saha, et.al. 2005).

In addition, the internet is expected to become young people's preferred information source by 2007¹ and a growing body of evidence finds that e-learning initiatives have the potential to enhance face to face promotional and educational services at a fraction of the cost. Online services can provide young people with an active learning space where they can reflect, network, engage and build skills.

In addition more needs to be done to support evidence-based research on community-based initiatives and collaborative projects between government and community that seek to provide civic education and foster political engagement in young people.

¹ Internet is currently the third most significant medium with 18 to 27-year-olds, behind TV and radio, but by 2007 it is predicted to become their primary medium, accounting for 45% of their media time (Scott, 2004)

Terms of Reference:

Education/Information

Young people make connections between the different areas of their lives, such as work, school, family, friends and popular culture. Linking awareness campaigns to other activities in which young people are involved can strengthen the message and legitimacy of enrolling to vote. In addition, research on youth participation shows that involving young people in decision-making is part of "a process of building relationships of mutual obligation and trust across community sectors" (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk & Mulford 2001, p. 20).

Queensland Youth Ambassadors to the Reach Out! service advocate that the EQC should:

"Be more relevant in their presentations to schools and young people in the sense of giving examples as to how voting and having your say does actually affect the way that politics and the state is run. Have postcards and stickers as well as the current school presentations that relate more to young people rather than the middle aged person he is often presenting it. Maybe even getting a young person to make the presentation so that the idea of voting is made more cool to young people these days."

"Get young people directly involved with creating the message, don't patronise young people, respect their intelligence and make it enjoyable."

Voter Registration

Young people contributing to this submission suggest the following ideas for facilitating voter registration for first time voters:

- Online registration. Allow the form to be completed and sent over the net rather than just by hand as many more young people now are using computers on a daily basis to complete their homework as well as chat to their friends and visit their favourite websites.
- Link EQC site to other popular sites (such as www.actnow.com.au) that young people visit often and make it appealing to someone who doesn't want to read an essay on how to apply.
- Ensure that eligibility to vote information is clear and easy to understand.
- Have devoted days at schools to where mass enrolling to vote can occur for grade 12 high school students.

Creating partnerships with youth initiatives can help raise awareness and a cultural commitment to participating in elections. Partnering with online youth services such as www.actnow.com.au can also help link the action of voting with issues that young people experience in their everyday lives.

Polling Stations

The location and 'ambiance' of voting stations can make a difference to the degree to which young people feel welcome, encouraged and see voting as relevant to their lives and the issues that they face. The following suggestions are made by Reach Out! Youth Ambassadors:

Use SMS technology to remind people about the dates and times of elections.

- Take the polling stations to places where young people are already engaged. Say to a shopping centre, a local PCYC, or youth centre. They don't need to be big stations, but enough to garner attention and encourage the young people to quickly walk in and cast their vote and keep on their way.
- Have poll stations open longer – say until 7pm. Make it so that there is something at the polling booths that will entice people to come and vote. For example, a free sausage sizzle off the BBQ, or a rock band that playing at the school between certain hours that they can come and watch for free after they vote. Turn voting into an event rather than a chore.
- Some young people feel that they don't have enough information about where polling stations are and what they have to do when they get there.

"They could have a seminar for first time voters...that'd be cool."

Close of Rolls

Young people at the Inspire Foundation felt that closing the rolls up to a week in advance disadvantaged young people. In addition to leaving rolls open for longer, young people believe that having online registration would make enrollment easier for first time voters.

"Often times young people work whenever they can get work and sometimes that means working up to or more than 10 days straight. Therefore if they can enroll on the net it would be a much more viable option for many young people."

"If young people are restricted, simply because they have not thought about enrolling before an election is called, and realise on the day of the announcement that they need to enroll, but aren't given the opportunity, they will be severely disadvantaged. Not to mention pissed off if they get a fine."

Fixed Election Day

Young people support the idea of a fixed election day:

"I think fixed terms are an excellent idea. Currently the government's are in power for around 2 and half years, how does that achieve anything for the wider community. A fixed term holds the government accountable to election promises and to deadlines for implementing reforms and change."

Others pointed out that the period during which an election is called and the date it is held can be confusing. A fixed election day would help ensure that all people knew

when they would need to vote (and would also help clarify by when they need to enroll).

Voting Age

Young people suggested that people aged 16 and 17 should have optional voting rights and compulsory voting should be left at 18.

Education in Schools

Young people believe that civic education in schools is valuable and should include discussions about current affairs. They argue that these subjects should be planned and facilitated in partnership with students, providing an active learning environment and demonstrating the commitment that adults have for involving young people in democratic processes. It is important to note that research finds that students do not necessarily relate their experience of student democracy (say, in Student Representative Councils) with broader democratic structures or politics (Saha, et.al. 2005). Schools must consider ways to genuinely involve students in broader decision making – and encourage students to participate in this process.

Young people also report that accesses to relevant and engaging online resources would give them flexibility to interact with information about civic engagement outside of school hours.

Over recent years internet access has been increasing significantly. Between 1998 and 2003 the proportion of households with internet access more than tripled from 16 percent in 1998 to 53 percent in 2003 (ABS, 2004). In 2003, 82 percent of young people aged 14-17 and 79 percent of young people aged 18-24 reported using the internet (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2004). As a result the internet represents a growing area for potential service delivery that can reach a large proportion of the population.

This submission argues that the Government should explore new ways of delivering civic education to young people, and that greater investment be made in developing and evaluating scaleable resources which can be accessed by isolated schools, as well as young people engaged in home schooling or school of the air, at low unit cost.

A service such as www.actnow.com.au, run by the Inspire Foundation, will provide information for young people on a range of social issues and will enable them to explore the myriad of ways in which they can exercise their civic and social rights through taking action. Voting is an important form of civic engagement, and there is significant opportunity for the government to support partnerships between ECQ and similar services to enhance the civic literacy of young people around elections and voting.

Political Parties

Young people are interested in a range of issues, but are often only consulted on issues that are predefined by 'adults'. One Youth Ambassador writes:

"A young person doesn't take a keen interest in their superannuation at 16 – they are a long way away from retiring. But they do care about other issues. Allow them to be engaged in creating policies that address issues that effect profoundly on their

lives, for example, education, arts, health issues, being able to earn a reasonable income to support themselves. Engage.”

Young people feel that politicians are often not interested in understanding the needs or opinions of young people.

“I think that political parties need to become more focused on what is affecting the lives of young people. They need to ensure that they are able to explain the decisions and changes that they are making. It seems as though politicians don't really care about people that can't vote for them (ie young people and teenagers). It needs to start with the politicians if they are ever going to make politics something that is helpful for everyone and not just those who are old enough to vote.”

Politicians

According to one Youth Ambassador:

“[Politicians can better engage] by listening to young people and being available to discuss young people's concerns with them. If politicians become responsive to young people then young people will become responsive to them. They need to take the first step. They need to get out of their suits and ties and come down to the level of young people and be willing to give them the time that they otherwise give to those who are old enough to vote. This definitely would have to be one of my personal biggest bug bears.”

Sites such as www.actnow.com.au will represent issues that young people care about, what they have to say and what they'd like to do about them. In supporting those services by providing funding, resources, networks, endorsements and through effective partnership, governments will enable young people to develop open spaces for discussion, debate and action

Being Heard

Young people expressed disillusionment with government opportunities to voice their opinions:

“My experience wasn't good. In Queensland, a young person has to pay to be involved. We don't want to have to pay to voice our opinion – I am talking specifically about being involved with the Queensland Youth Council. Another reason I have not engaged in government opportunities is because, I simply don't feel that what is done and said is ever acted upon. There seems to be no correlation between what we say and what happens in the future.”

This reflects research that many young people are skeptical of formal governance structures (Saggers, et.al, 2004). This has been attributed to confining youth involvement in one particular mechanism (such as Youth Advisory Board or Youth Councilor role) and therefore excluding the opinions of many young people – particularly those who are disadvantaged in some way (Saggers, et.al, 2004).

“In my personal experience when I one time wanted to meet with my local councilor I was told that I would have to wait approximately 3 months before I could have a half hour meeting with him. I found this really discouraging because I wanted to discuss something that was important to me but I was just put off and told to wait.”

How should government involve young people?

Suggestions from Queensland young people include:

- Face to face
- Online forum,
- Workshops
- Conferences
- Don't only have one-off consultations, develop ideas and create an energy, but continue to monitor it and encourage the development of the young person's involvement in the decision making process.
- Regular community youth meeting in a local community youth centre (where the politician is there just to listen).
- Feedback to young people what has been done with information gathered from consultations

Taking Action

Being able to participate in decision making, being asked an opinion, having it noted and acted upon. Being given opportunities to get involved with decision making and policy development is an important part of being a young person. Being able to access resources, track the impact of their contributions, share experiences, networks and learn from positive role models all contributes to the development of political efficacy.

What role can non-government foundations or community organisations play in getting young people active and involved with democracy?

Non-government organisations are in a unique position to deliver civic education that is meaningful and resonates with young people. Organisations, such as the Inspire Foundation, have proven track records on engaging young people in effective and efficient ways to deliver appropriate services that educate and build young people's capacity to access support networks (www.reachout.com.au ; www.beanbag.net.au). The www.actnow.com.au is a new program (official launch planned for April 06) that will enable young people to educate themselves about social and community causes they are passionate about, and make it easier for them to get involved. It will provide a wide range of information and support through a community website and online / face-to-face skills development training for young people who want to learn more about these issues and find ways to make a difference. Because the site has been developed in partnership with young people the content, layout and interactive features are relevant to young people and reflect where they are at. Services such as www.actnow.com.au will provide important civic education to young people in a proactive and culturally relevant way. The site will include information and shortcuts for participating in formal politics but the degree to which that can be done effectively will depend on ongoing collaboration and support from relevant agencies and organisations.

Concluding Comments

The Inspire Foundation welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Legal and Constitutional Committee of the Queensland Parliament. This Committee can help redress the increasing disengagement of young people from formal political process and political parties by educating, promoting and supporting the ways in which young people are getting involved and taking action.

Unless Governments support existing services developed for and by young people in which to foster civic engagement we risk alienating young people from formal processes of government. Strong links between policy and practice can be fostered through a multi-faceted approach that emphasises government-community collaboration by utilising existing infrastructure and networks used by young people. An increasing use of Information Communication Technologies will also enhance the scalability and cost-efficiency of civic education initiatives.

Accordingly, we support the Committee's inquiry and recommend that the Committee call for significantly increased investment in e-learning initiatives, including research, as part of a greater investment in civic education and practice to ensure that young people develop civic efficacy.

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