



What do Australia's Youth Parliaments Think?

Y Australia's response to 'Over to You' the Federal Government's

Youth Engagement Strategy Discussion Paper

Contents

1	Executive Summary	2
2	Recomendations	3
3	About Youth Parliament	4
4	What do Australia's Youth Parliaments Think?	8
	Appendix A: Contact Details	i

1. Executive Summary

'Over to You' has asked us how can the Australian Government lift its game in the engagement of young people in policy development and delivery?

There will be many answers to that question.

Some will focus on greater involvement with the sector or on specific programs or policies. Others will focus on the need for greater commitment by the Australian Government to bring the perspectives of young people into critical policy areas, such as housing, mental health and the environment. The Youth Advisory groups already established are a good step in this direction.

This response to 'Over to You' focuses on another critical area – strengthening the capabilities of young people to engage with the Australian Government.

This needs policies and programs that strengthen the voice of young people by supporting greater confidence, skill development and an improved understanding of how our systems of government work.

This paper provides a detailed case study of the Youth Parliament programs. We believe there are valuable lessons to be drawn from these programs in the further development of the Australian Government's Youth Engagement Model.

For one week every year, the seats of Australia's state parliaments are filled by young people who develop, debate and vote on policies that reflect the passions, interests and concerns of their generation. This year those voices will also be heard in Darwin as the NT program is rebooted.

In 2023, more than 440 young Australians aged from 15 to 25 have taken part in the Y's Youth Parliament program. They are supported by the taskforces of volunteer young people ('taskies') who are generally Youth Parliamentarians from earlier years. Nearly 90 young people volunteered as taskies in 2023.

Youth Parliamentarians receive training in public speaking and leadership at residential camps. They work together to research the issues they're passionate about and transform those ideas into formal policy proposals as parliamentary bills. Then they debate the merits of those proposals following the processes and rules of the Westminster parliamentary system.

In 2023, approximately 60 Bills were developed, debated and voted on across the country covering a wide variety of policy issues from mental health to housing, maternity services and vaping. Each Youth Parliament also debated a 'national motion to public importance' which this year was a motion for a Federal Human Rights Bill.

This submission is the first effort to pull together a national picture of the work of our Youth Parliaments. It aims to provide insight into the question - What do Australia's Youth Parliaments think? It does that by providing an overview of the work Youth Parliament's undertook in 2023, with a specific focus on the key issues highlighted in 'Over to You'.

At a time of rising global threats to democracy, programs like Youth Parliaments provide a fundamental grounding in our democratic systems and processes for the next generation of Australian leaders.

Y Australia congratulates our Youth Parliamentarians, taskies and the Y staff that support them for their passion, efforts and outcomes. We commend this work to political leaders from all Australian parliaments and from every political perspective, as a testament to the creativity of young people and the value of their insights.

"Youth Parliament has been such an incredible experience for me. It's really helped me to work on leadership, advocacy, teamwork, and more specifically how to take on extra responsibility as I was a minister this year. But even more importantly, I've made such meaningful friendships with those around me. I feel so safe to be myself at youth parliament which has allowed me to make genuine friendships I know will last a long time."

Quote from a 2023 participant

"Amplifying the voice of young people to our National Government is critical given the jurisdiction's responsibility for so many issues that relate directly to young Australians. These opportunities for young people to develop their leadership and analytical skills, to prepare and debate critical issues and to contribute to debate are also significant. These experiences can lead to life changing moments for participants. I was a youth parliamentarian in 1991 and it is an experience that encouraged me to care deeply about the importance of our systems of parliament and public administration."

Ben Hubbard – Chief of Staff of Prime Minister Julia Gillard and President of Y Australia

2. Recommendations

Invest in the capabilities of young people to support their engagement in the policy discussions and debates critical to their lives and their communities, ensuring equitable opportunities for a range of diverse communities. Investments should support young people's opportunities to develop:



the skills needed to strengthen their voices in policy development and advocacy



the confidence to advocate on behalf of themselves and their communities



their understanding of, and engagement with, Australia's democratic institutions and systems.



3. About Youth Parliament

Y Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide this response to the “Over to You” discussion paper.



680+

Communities

11.5k+

Employees

16m+

Participations

The Y (formerly the 'YMCA') in Australia is a social enterprise, operating in more than 680 communities, with 11,500 employees and over 16 million participations in our programs and facilities over the past year.

Globally, the YMCA is the largest youth movement in the world, reaching 65 million people in over 120 countries, on every continent.

Across Australia, the Y offers a wide range of programs and services to support children and young people across their lifespan, in every state and territory.

The Y's mission is to empower children, young people and communities Australia-wide to build a just, sustainable, equitable and inclusive world, where every person, regardless of background, can thrive in body, mind and spirit; and can reach their full potential, with dignity.

Last year, the world YMCA movement came together to agree on its first ever global strategy, Vision 2030 - which commits to global action across four pillars: Community Wellbeing, Meaningful Work, Sustainable Planet and a Just World.

Our Y federation in Australia, made up of 12 member associations and four national entities, are aligned in our commitment to drive systemic change for a better world with and for young people, in respect of these four pillars.

In Australia, the Youth Parliament program is a critical part of our Just World goal, to amplify the voices of young people as agents of change, for an equal and safe world.

The benefits of the Youth Parliament are vast. Not only does the program provide an important platform to elevate young people's insights and lived experience, but its components also support young people to learn new skills, build confidence, lead, and ultimately, thrive.



Through our work, we know a range of important needs must be supported to enable young people to flourish. Those needs include:

A sense of belonging

To know they have talent

The power to make decisions that influence their world

To have opportunities to be part of a broader social network

To realise that their life has a purpose

The Youth Parliament program provides a safe, learning environment where these needs can be met.

Youth Parliament participants collectively debate social issues relevant to young people, critically discuss creative solutions and develop influential Bills – all in a team environment where they can trust and be trusted. The program builds participants' capacity to think critically, work in a team, show leadership and articulate their ideas.

In practice, the program is achieved through a series of training days and weekly committee meetings, culminating in an intensive weeklong camp. In preparation for the camp, participants

work together to discuss ideas and write bills on political issues that are important to them. During the camp the young people debate and vote on the bills they will take to Parliament House. Those looking to further develop their leadership capacity can choose to take upon a Ministerial role in the program. Participants are also offered the opportunity to return in future years as a volunteer to assist in running the program and mentor future cohorts.

At every step of the program, each young person has the opportunity – and are supported and encouraged – to contribute their ideas and insights and build a self-recognition of their own talents, competencies and purpose.

Evaluations have demonstrated the immense value of the Youth Parliament programs and connecting with like-minded peers, as reported by participants. For example, after participating in the 2023 Y WA Youth Parliament:

94%

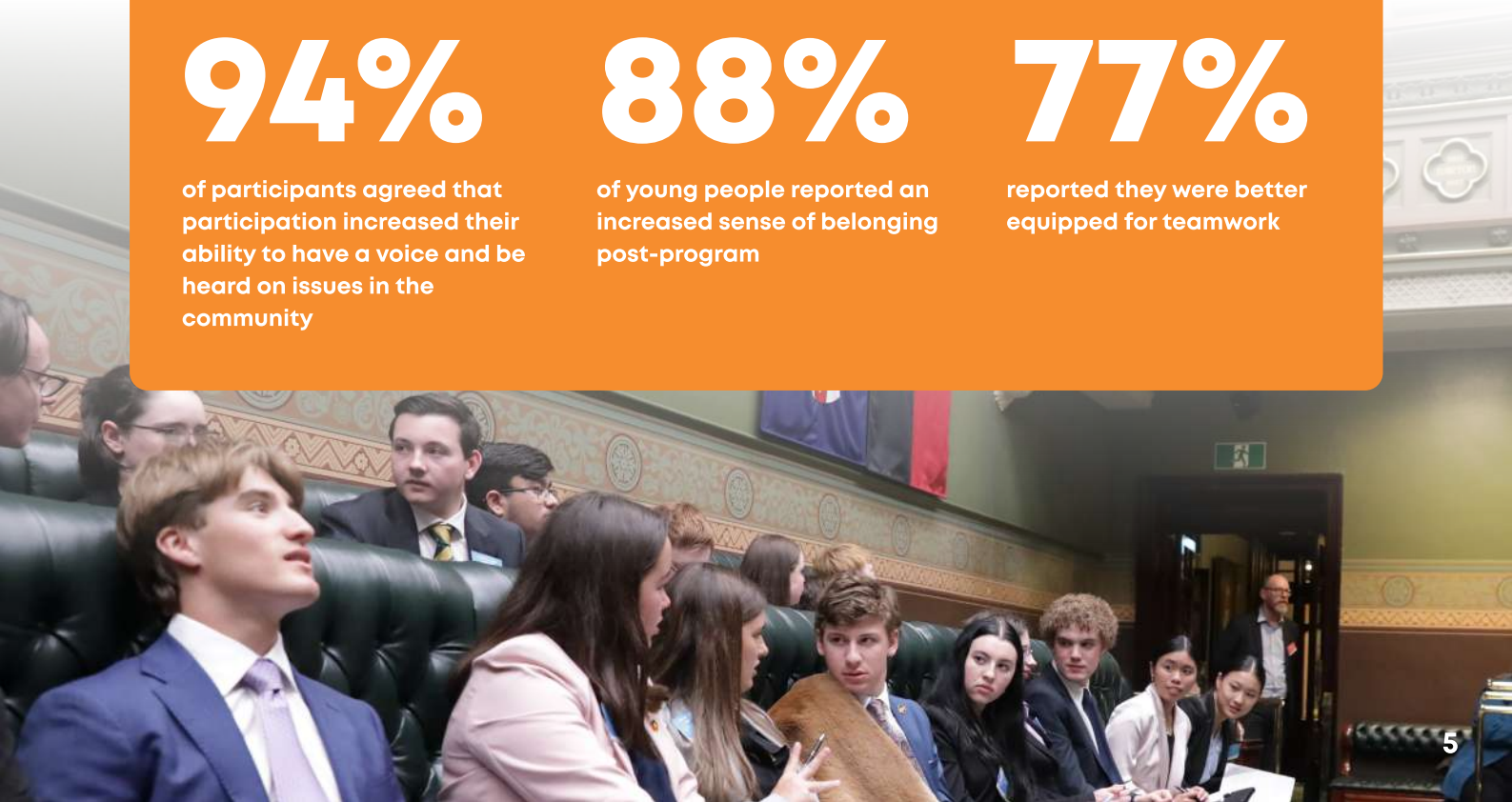
of participants agreed that participation increased their ability to have a voice and be heard on issues in the community

88%

of young people reported an increased sense of belonging post-program

77%

reported they were better equipped for teamwork



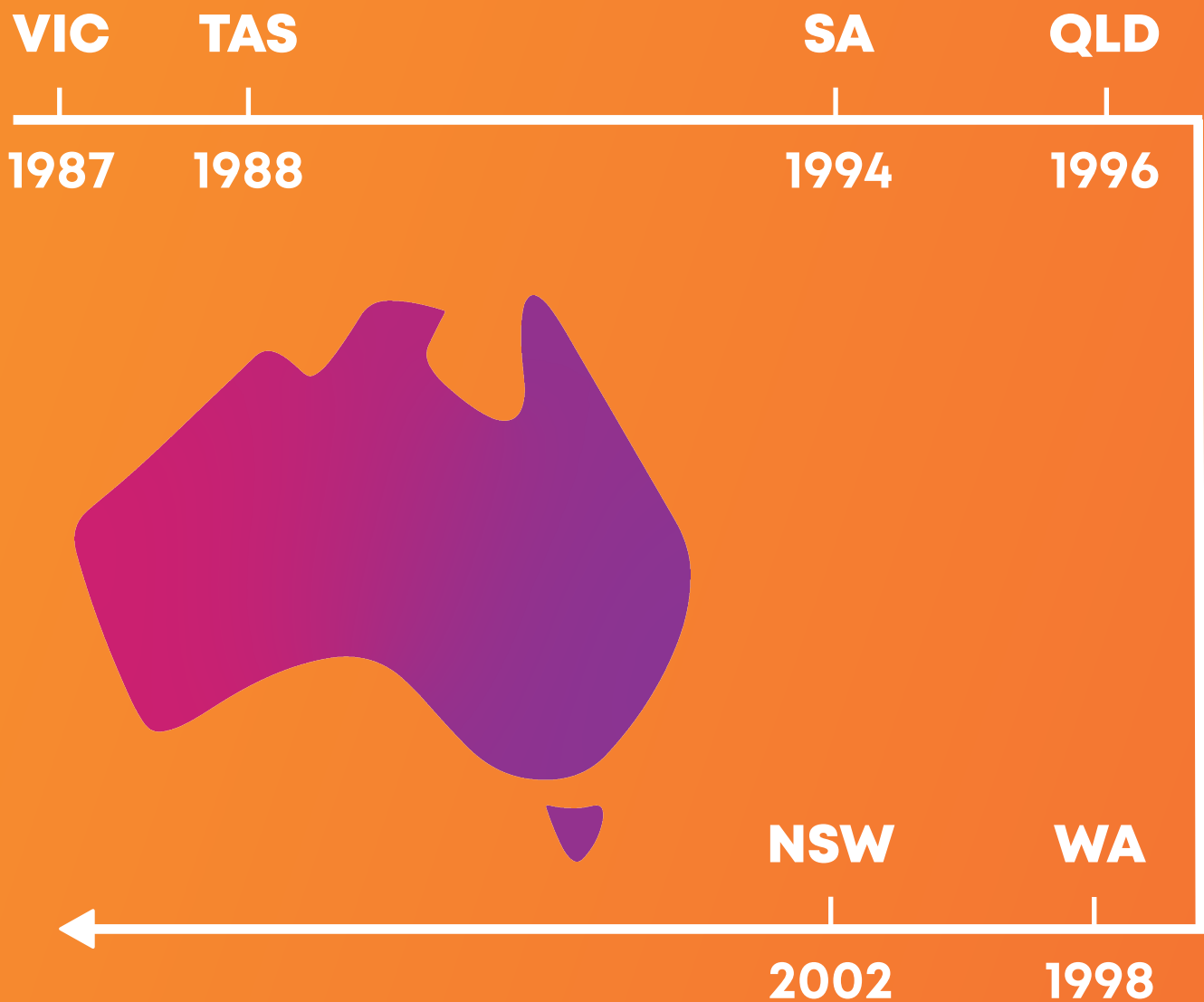
There are records of Youth Parliaments in Australia dating back to the late sixties. Today's annual programs have been operating continuously since the late 1980s.

Young people often take the lead on issues that may seem radical at first but are later widely accepted in our communities. Over the years Youth Parliament Bills have preceded actual reforms on areas like gun control, euthanasia rights, drug testing for drivers and bans on single use plastic bags. Our Victorian program has identified nearly 70 of their Youth Parliament Bills that preceded later changes to Victorian laws.

Youth Parliaments are not unique to Australia operating globally in various capacities in North America, Asia and Europe. The YMCA also operates similar programs in the USA and the UK.

There have been a small number of Federal Youth Parliaments in the 90's and early 2000's, though none in the last decade. Indigenous Youth Parliaments were also held in 2012, 2014 and 2017.

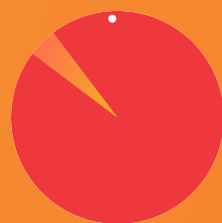
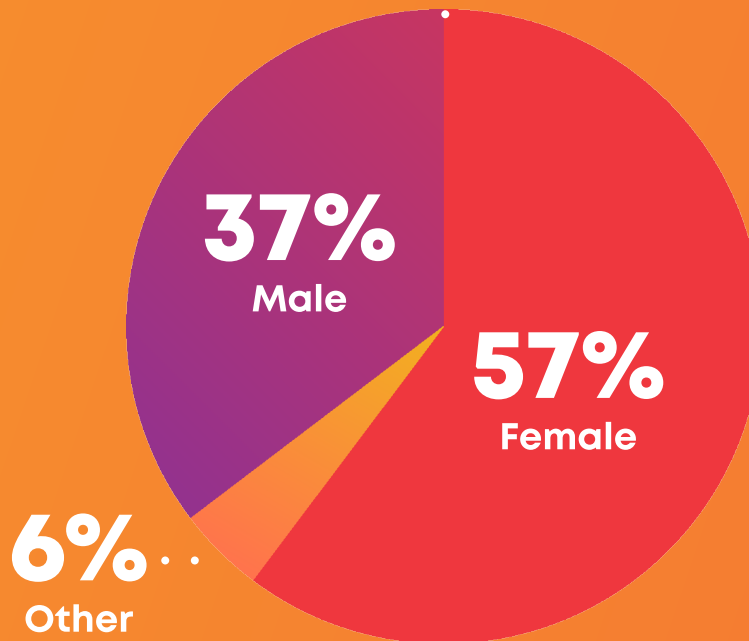
Year the annual program was established



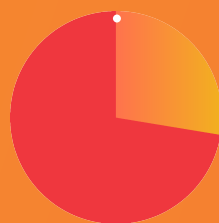
A truly diverse national reach: reflection on the 2023 cohort

438

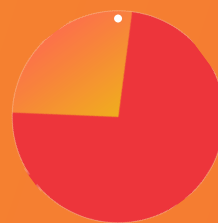
Participants in the 2023 programs



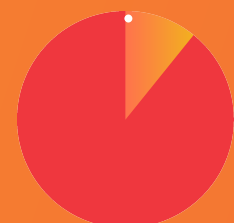
6%
First Nations



28%
CALD



26%
LGBTQIA+



10%
Disability

There is strong representation from rural and regional Australia and (for school aged participants) from government schools too

4. What do Australia's Youth Parliaments Think?

'Over to You' identifies six key issues and invites young people to provide feedback. The following pages outline the work Youth Parliament's undertook in 2023 relevant to these six issues, as well as a number of other Bills on matters important to participants.

The evidence shows clearly that these are some of the most important issues of the day to young Australians. This comes from a range of sources such as the annual Mission Australia survey. They also align strongly to the survey of Youth Parliamentarians (see page 17) and the strong alignment of many the Bills debated in this year's programs.

We also know these issues are global priorities for young people. They strongly align with the World YMCA Pillars of Impact endorsed in 2022 (see page 16). The World YMCA Pillars of Impact reflect three years of consultation with our global youth movement that spans across more than 100 countries.



Mental health and access to healthcare



Reform proposals from 2023 Youth Parliaments:

- Improve women's health literacy to combat systemic discrimination in care and research, and introduce paid menstrual leave and free menstrual products.
- Introduce mental health training in workplaces where 'physical' first aid training is already required. This would be supported by public funding.
- Introduce greater monitoring of vaping on school premises, greater education on the effects of vaping and vaping quitting programs to reduce rates of vaping among young people.
- Expand of online mental health services.
- Develop and implement mental health and wellbeing curriculum that supports primary school aged students to build awareness of mental health, coping strategies and reduce stigma.
- Deliver mental health maintenance courses in correctional facilities to support inmates after release.
- Provide greater support for people experiencing perinatal mental illness in isolated communities.
- Expand maternal and perinatal care and support in rural and regional areas.

Key Bills developed by 2023 Youth Parliaments





Promoting equity and removing discrimination

Reform proposals from 2023 Youth Parliaments:

- Enable better access to social and cultural opportunities (sports, arts, languages, etc.) for children and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds through interventions such as transport vouchers, curriculum credits, and targeted community funding.
- Delivering mandatory training for the public sector workforce to enhance their understanding of matters related to Sexual and Romantic Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (SROGIESC).
- Incorporate truth-telling and cultural appreciation in Queensland state schools education on the impacts of colonisation, conflict and assimilation on First Nations peoples in Australia.
- Establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to NSW parliament.
- Deliver a program for recent migrants to improve their access to language programs, health services, housing support, job accessibility and education services.
- Improve disability accessibility at all stations and public transport services, including providing personnel to assist people with disability exiting and entering public transport.

Key Bills developed by 2023 Youth Parliaments



¹Sexual and Romantic Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics

Climate change and the environment



Reform proposals from 2023 Youth Parliaments:

- Mandate 10% of petrol sales to be from bioethanol sources.
- Increase funding in native forest regeneration and sustainable plantations to create more jobs in the logging industry.
- Deliver a public education program on recycling soft plastics, boost funding research in soft plastic recycling research and establish publicly owned soft plastic recycling facilities.
- Develop a scheme to minimise ambient urban heat through increasing urban tree canopy coverage; encouraging roof materials that reflect rather than absorb heat; and increasing the installation of green roofs.
- Roll out a marine public education program to build public awareness of marine animals, their ecosystems and the importance of conservation.
- Implement green, environmentally friendly infrastructure in new developments.
- Introduce tax deductions for investments in climate action.
- Introduce a program to boost recycling rates by establishing a waste pricing incentive and increasing collection, treatment and disposal services for domestic and commercial use.

Key Bills developed by 2023 Youth Parliaments





Cost of living and housing

Reform proposals from 2023 Youth Parliaments:

- Improve access to housing through construction of new social and affordable housing; expansion of social housing eligibility; the reintroduction of duty for investment properties; and incentives and strategies to increase housing density along public transport corridors.
- Design a community-based, multi-disciplinary case management model for services delivered to people who are experiencing homelessness.
- Create more walkable and sustainable urban communities, with greater, more affordable housing supply.
- Introduce protections for renters through new rental controls; deadlines for landlords to fix deficiencies in rental properties; a mechanism that provides better oversight of landlords and real estate agents; and temporary rent freeze.
- Improve access to affordable housing through a combination of grants and tax incentives for affordable housing projects, strengthening rental assistance programs and a government buyback of unoccupied properties to create a stock of rent controlled social housing.

Key Bills developed by 2023 Youth Parliaments



Access to a quality education



Reform proposals from 2023 Youth Parliaments:

- Establish online learning alternatives for secondary school students who are unable to attend mainstream schooling due to physical, mental health or educational needs. This includes providing students with the necessary devices and online curriculum, as well as professional development for teachers to support online learning.
- Address teacher shortages for regional schools through enhanced recruitment, career pathways, and needs-based measures.
- Reduce environmental waste and cost barriers through a centralised approach to textbooks.
- Equip schools and students with skills and resources to decrease bullying.
- Promote inclusion and appreciation for Polynesian and First Nations culture in schools.
- Establish a cybersecurity education program for primary school students and their parents and carers to improve their understanding of benefits, risks and safeguards of online activity, including social media.
- Improve students' and teachers' understanding of disability.

Key Bills developed by 2023 Youth Parliaments



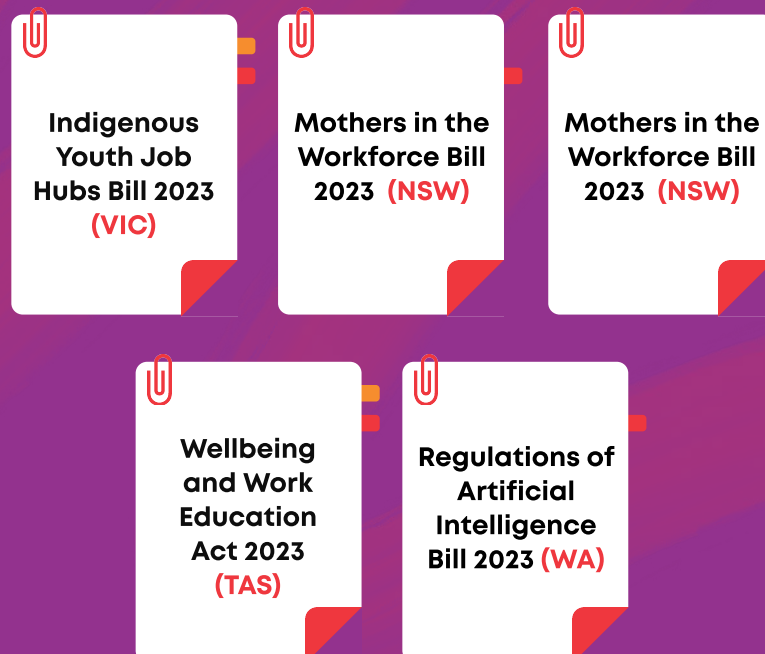
Employment opportunities



Reform proposals from 2023 Youth Parliaments:

- Introduce a workplace readiness program for secondary school students which upskills young people on topics, such as finances and paying tax, resume writing and job skills, employment law, work life balance and working with people of diverse backgrounds.
- Regulation of AI to mitigate risks associated with AI implementation in businesses and address the impact of automation on employment including worsening inequalities.
- Improve access to child care including in the workplace, introduce motherhood education and provide new counselling and psychologist services for new mothers.
- Close the gap in employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people by establishing an Indigenous Youth Jobs Hub that build young people's job readiness skills and connect them directly with businesses and job opportunities.
- Introduce employment incentives to renewable energy companies to employ workers from fossil fuel industries.

Key Bills developed by 2023 Youth Parliaments



Other Bills from the 2023 Youth Parliaments



Regional Business Incubator Establishment Bill 2023 (SA)

to establish business incubators and encourage businesses to move to regional locations.



Truthful Political Advertising Bill 2023 (SA)

to better regulate political advertising.



Cybersecurity (Protections and Preventions) Bill 2023 (NSW)

to establish an agency responsible for cybersecurity and improve education on cybersecurity.



Protection of Protest Rights Bill 2023 (NSW)

to repeal restrictions on protests.



Youth Justice (Reform) Act 2023 (TAS) and the Youth Justice Reform Bill 2023 (SA) to increase the age of criminal responsibility.



Animal Welfare in Shelters Bill 2023 (VIC)

to reduce overcrowding in animal shelters through better rehoming.



Lowering the Victorian Voting Age Bill 2023 (VIC)

to lower the voting age to 16.



Food Waste Awareness and Reduction Bill 2023 (VIC)

to establish a central Food Bank system to reduce food waste and provide greater food security.



Reduction of Hostile Architecture Bill 2023 (VIC) and the Removal of Aggressive Infrastructure for Safe and Equal Cities (RAISE) Bill 2023 (SA)

to create more safe spaces for homeless people in public spaces.



Electoral Affairs Bill 2023 (WA)

to improve local government democracy including by introducing online voting.



Mandatory Trauma-Informed Training for Child Welfare Bill 2023 (WA)

to expand trauma informed training for professional especially those with mandatory reporting obligations.



Alignment of the six Key Issues with the World YMCA Pillars of Impact

Priority Areas in 'Over to You'



Promoting equity and removing discrimination



Cost of living and housing



Mental health and access to healthcare



Access to a quality education



Employment opportunities



Climate change and the environment



Sustainable Planet

World YMCA Pillars



Just World



Community Wellbeing



Meaningful Work

Youth Parliamentarians² were surveyed on the issues that are most important to them and unsurprisingly their top responses align closely with the six priority areas identified in 'Over to You'.

29%

Mental Health, Wellbeing, Bullying

24%

Climate Change, Environment, Littering and Pollution

18%

Inclusion, Diversity and Discrimination

16%

Poverty & Homelessness

18%

Youth Crime and Civil Unrest

17%

Housing, Cost of Living and Inflation

12%

Community and Political Engagement, Social Apathy

10%

Health Services

12%

Pension, Social Services and Securities

11%

Public Facilities and Services, Community, Sport and Recreation

14%

Education

10%

Substance Abuse, Vaping

8%

Public Transport and Roads

6%

Gender, Sexuality and LGBTQIA+

6%

Perception, Body Image, Social Media and Esafety

7%

Infrastructure, Maintenance and Public Works

6%

Employment, Training and Skills Development

²Responses from 326 Youth Parliamentarians in 2023

Appendix A: Contact Details

If you would like to discuss this submission further, please contact Jarrod Dobson jarrod.dobson@the-y.org.au, National Director of Advocacy and Public Policy.

See more information about the Youth Parliament program and our other services and programs on our [website](#).

For more information on the respective Youth Parliament programs, please see websites below:

- [New South Wales Youth Parliament](#)
- [Northern Territory Youth Parliament](#)
- [Queensland Youth Parliament](#)
- [South Australia Youth Parliament](#)
- [Tasmania Youth Parliament](#)
- [Victoria Youth Parliament](#)
- [Western Australia Youth Parliament](#)

