

November 2021

Giving youth confidence to speak up, share ideas and help shape the future

Empowering young people to raise their voice in policy and decision-making was one of the successes of an expanded Invisible Hurdles Project. Stage II involved a comprehensive legal education program with young people from the three project partners, including Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre (WFLC), Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service and North East Support and Action for Youth Inc. Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) undertook three major activities to encourage the young people to have a say on issues impacting them.

The [*Pathways to empowerment and justice The Invisible Hurdles Stage II Research and Evaluation Final Report*](#) was released in June 2021. Authors from The Australian National University, Pamela Taylor-Barnett, Hon. Lecturer, and Dr Liz Curran, Hon. Associate Professor, evaluated the project and noted the work done in the area of empowerment of young people had been “effective and outstanding”.

The Project Evaluators observed: “young people are some of the most disenfranchised young people in the nation, and therefore are often too stressed by their own daily concerns and too disempowered to engage politically.”

Road to change

Students at WFLC raised concerns about being unable to do driving practice during Stage 3 COVID restrictions in Victoria. This would stop them working towards the 120 hours of driving practice they needed to get their P plates. They were worried this delay would likely reduce their ability to get a job after they finished school. The Project team proposed writing a letter to the relevant government ministers urging them to change the rules and the young people were keen to be involved. Their perspectives were included in the letter, which was also sent to the local State MP and Victoria Cross Border Commissioner. Shortly after the letter was sent, the rules were changed. While there is no way to measure how much impact the letter had, the young people were relieved and proud they had taken action on this important issue.

Building bridge with local police

A Wodonga Police community consultation exercise was an opportunity for locals to have a say. With the help of the IH Project team, more than 20 young people connected to the IH program completed the survey. Results showed they had a high level of distrust of police. The Project team consulted the young people to see what would improve their level of trust. The young people decided it was a good idea to invite a police officer to the school. A way around the anxiety felt among the group was to structure the visit like an episode of the ABC program, “You Can’t Ask That”, where questions were pre-prepared and asked anonymously. The visit was such a success the police officer now visits the school twice a term to chat to young people, answer questions they have and deliver education sessions on topics including sex and consent, alcohol and drugs and cybersafety.

Local voice in youth strategy

Another major achievement was having young people get involved in the public consultation process for a new, whole-of-government youth strategy in Victoria. The Project team was involved in a community forum initially, and then engaged young people through a survey. The survey taught the young people about the process of law-making and what it means to be a

democracy. Survey results were submitted to the government, and also used as part of an extensive collaborative submission.

Idea leads to new project

One suggestion made by the young people was that “teachers and wellbeing teams [in schools] receive training in identifying family violence and be aware of local family violence services so this information can be made available to young people.”

This suggestion fed directly into a successful funding application by HRCLS to the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust to run a new project, titled AMPLIFY, to work with four local schools.

Standing up on issues

The ongoing encouragement and engagement methods led to students being fuelled to conduct individual advocacy. One young person rang Australian Parliament House to speak to the Prime Minister after the ban on mobile phones in schools was introduced, while another wrote a letter to their local council about long grass attracting snakes at a playground near her house.

Of the latter student, her teacher commented: “She was made to feel that she had a voice...It’s something that will probably make her more politically active in the future...that her say is important.”

Project meeting aims to innovatively teach and inspire young people

This empowerment of young people is one of the main goals of the Invisible Hurdles Project and has so far been a success as observed by project evaluators.

“The project intends to overcome these hurdles by bringing legal help and information directly to where the young person visits; by building trust from an initial borrowed-trust introduction, from non-legal professionals such as social workers and teachers who the young person respects; by re-thinking the ways legal information needs to be passed on and utilising the concept of ‘legal secondary consultations’ ; and by utilising a network of organisations to activate for change on issues that continually affect the young people they all service.” (*Pathways to empowerment and justice* The Invisible Hurdles Stage II Research and Evaluation Final Report, p11)