



2



youth affairs council
OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Advancing Aboriginal Youth Leadership

According to the 2006 Census, 56% of Aboriginal South Australians are under 25 years of age. Despite this relatively high level of representation amongst the Aboriginal community broadly, opportunities to build this group's civic engagement and leadership are limited.

Young Aboriginal people are more likely than other South Australians to experience poverty, racism, poor health, incomplete education and training, and unemployment. Coupled with this, young Aboriginal South Australians live with loss and grief, both historical and intergenerational as well as contemporary loss and grief, as part of their daily experience; this impacts directly on the resilience of individuals and communities.

Too many young Aboriginal South Australians are disenfranchised and disconnected from the broader community. Current opportunities for these young people to engage within and outside of their communities are limited and often fail to create the necessary pathways to self-empowerment and advancement.

As a matter of urgency, we need to engage all young Aboriginal South Australians in development programs that build their social inclusion; connect them with education and employment; strengthen their links to community and build their networks in the broader community; build on current best practice within Aboriginal-led agencies and programs; take a range of formats, to response to the diverse needs and interests of young people; ensure a role for Elders in mentoring the emerging, young community leaders; and ultimately enhance young people's capacity to achieve life success and establish a new generation of leaders within the Aboriginal community.

A strategy to build Aboriginal youth leadership will create ownership by young people of their communities, ensure that young people have a say regarding their futures, and build the capacity of communities to prevent problems before they start. To achieve this, there is a need to revisit existing structures and extend them in order to build improved opportunities for young Aboriginal leaders in the state. As well as building leadership, the engagement of young Aboriginal South Australians will ensure their access to all of the ingredients necessary for life success.

This strategy will not be a panacea to all the challenges that are facing our Aboriginal communities and, through them, all South Australians; however, it will constitute a significant contribution towards 'closing the gap'.

Background

South Australia's first Aboriginal Youth Culture Week was held in 1989 and was designed to showcase the achievements of young Aboriginal South Australians. In the early 1990s the Department for Human Services established Aboriginal Youth Action Committees (AYACs) throughout the state; AYACs comprise a statewide community development model intended to enable young Aboriginal people to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to enhance their personal futures and the futures of their communities. Currently, there are approximately 20 AYACs operating in South Australia, in areas/regions ranging from metropolitan Adelaide, to Meningie to Coober Pedy. AYACs now fall under the operations of the state Department for Families and Communities.

In addition to the AYACs, there are other programs that focus on Indigenous youth leadership. However, whilst frequently delivering good outcomes for individuals and communities, these programs can be disjointed and unrelated to a pathway by which young Aboriginal people might reach positions of leadership and influence.

In June 2007, the *Serious Repeat Young Offenders Consultation: final report on consultation with Aboriginal Communities*, written by Tauto Sansbury following extensive consultation with the Aboriginal community, called for the government to "develop targeted programs with sufficient and sustainable funding to promote youth leadership, role models and mentoring." To date, discrete and one-off funding has been granted to a small number of programs, however there is no coordinated strategy for building Aboriginal youth leadership in the state.

The principles that underpin the AYAC structure offer tremendous potential as a gateway to a connected approach to building Aboriginal youth leadership. The most successful AYACs act as a forum for engaging Aboriginal young people on key issues of the day through partnerships with schools, Aboriginal-led youth services and other regional networks. Over the past decade, AYACs have contributed to the development of young Aboriginal leaders who are now working in leadership roles within the education, government, arts and community sectors.

However, since the time of their establishment, the visibility of the AYACs and their young members has significantly diminished, whilst the challenges confronting many of their communities remain the same. There is an urgent need to lift the profile of AYACs, and with them the issues and interests of young Aboriginal South Australians.

The need for greater engagement with young Aboriginal people is a common source of concern for those working in the government and non-government sectors. Young people are entitled to a say on issues that affect their lives and must be engaged in the democratic process.

In 2000, AYACs recommended that their regional network be strengthened through the establishment of a regional youth council and employment of a regional youth coordinator. These initiatives were not funded at the time, however there remains a need to reinvigorate and strengthen the AYAC structure and establish pathways leading from AYACs to higher levels of engagement for Aboriginal young people in the state.

Policy and programs regarding young people need to be developed within communities through strong partnership between young people and Elders, to ensure that responses meet the needs of young people, are culturally appropriate, and also address broader community cohesion. In 1998 Neville Highfold presented a 'Nunga Youth Charter' to the Aboriginal Elders Conference held in Coober Pedy. Amongst other things, this charter stated, "We would like the state and federal governments to put Aboriginal youth issues back on the top of the agenda." Ten years on, this objective has still not been achieved.

Re-engaging young Aboriginal leaders

Whilst some of the structure to promote Aboriginal youth leadership continues to operate, such as through the AYACs, there is a need to re-engage and build upon these structures to advance Aboriginal youth leadership. Reviewing the resources for and support to AYACs is integral to this.

Future mechanisms for promoting Aboriginal youth leadership should leverage off of and expand existing structures, and create opportunities for young people to move out of their communities and engage with young people across the state. This will require a strategy of many parts, engaging schools, AYACs, and youth-led movements such as the National Indigenous Youth Movement of Australia, as well as provide opportunities for young people's connection with mainstream leadership programs and mechanisms. These measures have at their heart a process to promote learning around what's currently working well and building on these successes.

Opportunities for engagement must be available equally to all young people; poverty and disadvantage traditionally keeps individuals locked within their communities, however an effective strategy for developing youth leadership will ensure the removal of financial barriers to engagement. Youth leadership development needs to be pursued in the context of greater family and community supports, in direct recognition that the wellbeing of a community directly impacts on the wellbeing and opportunities available to its young people.

Through a discussion held in 2008 with the Aboriginal Youth Development Officers (YDOs) who support the AYACs, the following have been identified as barriers within their current operations, to achieving the broader objective of strengthening Aboriginal youth leadership:

- the failure of current funding levels to achieve the objectives of young people and their communities through the AYAC structure;
- systemic issues, such as barriers around literacy and numeracy and transience within some communities, which limit the capacity of some young people to engage within the AYAC structure without significant support and assistance from YDOs, who are generally employed on a part-time basis only and not resourced to provide this necessary support;
- a lack of mentors and other supports to enable AYAC members to remain engaged with the structure, with reports that many Elders are 'tired and wanting the next generation to step up';
- the capacity of individuals to engage due to community problems, drug and alcohol issues, family and domestic violence, and safety - these issues can also often result in a high level of membership turnover;
- unrealistic expectations being placed on Aboriginal YDOs, who operate in relative isolation and commonly 'volunteer' many unfunded and unpaid hours each week in order to meet the minimum requirements of their AYAC, expectations within their communities and to satisfy their own passion to adequately support the young people within their communities;

- the burden of administration, which works to remove YDOs' focus from youth development and onto the treadmill of applying for funding, often on a one-off basis for piecemeal amounts, then writing onerous reports to acquire funding – this simply distracts YDOs from what they do best;
- a perception that there is a lack of interest, amongst decision-makers and the broader community, in the views of Aboriginal young people and that this lack of interest is demonstrated by a lack of engagement with the AYAC structure by these groups;
- practical barriers to participation, such as transport, location, the appropriateness of certain modes of consultation employed by external agencies and individuals;
- the capacity of the AYAC structure, and AYAC resources, to accommodate the needs of children younger than 12 as well as their families and to recognise the family responsibilities of many young people of an eligible age for AYACs;
- improved understandings within communities of the opportunities that may be available to young people and how whole communities can support their access and how these opportunities for young people can help whole communities learn from each other;
- the loss of self-determination, leading to a degradation of communities' capacity to lead their own empowerment and development; and
- the commitment of governments and key agencies to support the work of youth development, and value and invest adequately in those structures and workers who deliver youth development.

Moving forward

YACSA believes that an integrated approach to building Aboriginal youth leadership, appropriately resourced and supported through state government coordination, is vital for South Australia and its Aboriginal communities. YACSA calls for:

- a formal review and mapping of Aboriginal youth engagement structures operating across local, state and federal governments, followed by a comprehensive program of promotion of these opportunities within communities;
- an audit of the amount of unfunded time being contributed to support Aboriginal youth development by Aboriginal workers, agencies and volunteers including Elders, as a strategy to measure unmet need in this area;
- engagement of stakeholders within communities, particularly focusing on young people, to identify areas for better supporting and building upon existing structures;
- state-wide coordination of Aboriginal youth leadership structures, to ensure maximum benefit and engagement;
- promotion of existing success stories that have emerged from AYACs and other Aboriginal youth leadership structures; and
- the development of formalised mechanisms to ensure that the voices of young Aboriginal South Australians are being heard, and responded to, by the broader community.

YACSA would like to acknowledge the generous contribution of time that many Aboriginal youth workers have given to the development of this paper. This paper is the result of a range of discussions held within and outside of the youth sector over a period of 18 months. We offer our heartfelt thanks and appreciation to those workers who have contributed information and knowledge referenced in this discussion paper.

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia
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