



“Young people face significant challenges but are passionate about creating a better world for themselves and future generations... It is not enough to ask young people to be their own advocates or tell their own stories – they require resources, skills and infrastructure to be heard.” Research paper, Amplifying the Voices of Young People

Contributing to Society

Increasing young people’s agency by building their capacity and opportunities to drive change on the issues that matter to them most



BACKGROUND

“Agency, choice, control... these are words that relate to human rights. Meaningful participation is a human right of young people... it’s not a nice-to-have, fluffy thing.”

The June 2021 launch of VFFF’s new five year strategy *Backing Young People* was the culmination of a ten month strategic review process. Led by expert research, VFFF developed four grant-making focus areas: *Decent Work, Contributing to Society, Caring for the Environment* and *Exploring Christian Faith and Values*.

In July 2021, VFFF consulted with more than 20 youth-led and youth-focused organisations to help inform our funding under *Contributing to Society*. We asked them questions to better understand how this funding might support and amplify initiatives that elevate the voices of young people in society.

The following presentation slides summarise this consultation and what the findings mean for the *Contributing to Society* focus area.



“There’s almost no young person that, put in the right environment, doesn’t want to make the world a better place.”

WHAT WE HEARD – KEY INSIGHTS

“If you build agency, you build an interest in changing the world.”

- Young people report a combination of **‘hope and frustration’**. While they are invested in building a better future, young people are often framed as “the problem” and excluded from discussions and decisions that affect them.
- A crucial step in building agency is recognising that young people are **‘experts in their own lives’** and **‘active participants’** in the world. When young people feel their insights are valued, they are empowered to contribute to society.
- Young people are drawn to initiatives with three key ingredients – **‘opportunities to make friends, learn new skills and make a difference.’**
- Young people are **leading movements** and **‘doing the work’** to **drive change** on issues that matter to them. They offer unique **points of difference** as agents of change: they are nimble, have digital engagement skills and a **‘fresh set of eyes’** to apply to social issues.
- However, youth-led initiatives are chronically **under-resourced, time poor** and reliant on **volunteer networks**. Inspiring young leaders often feel **‘undervalued’**, lack **‘professional development’** and experience **‘burnout’**.
- The youth sector recognises that youth representation and participation in decision-making is **‘best practice’** and **improves service delivery**. However, they need **‘time, resources and staff** to incorporate processes and strategies that **elevate youth voices** in their work.’



WHAT WE HEARD – OPPORTUNITIES

“Having people that believe in you is truly an important ingredient.”

- **Developing a new area:** youth representation is an **emerging** interest for philanthropy. There is a great opportunity for VFFF to **catalyse youth-led** work, particularly in NSW and QLD.
- **Building the evidence base:** there is a unique opportunity to contribute to the evidence base and **understanding of the value of building youth agency**.
- **Strengthening capacity:** there is a tendency for philanthropy to ‘fund project work without acknowledging the **ecosystem** needed for young people to thrive.’ Core and capacity-building funding in the youth space would be **‘game-changing’**, enabling organisations and individuals to take their work to the **next level**.
- **Walking the walk:** often discussions about youth representation are ‘just another formalised **chat fest**.’ This is an opportunity for VFFF to stay true to our commitment to **community-led granting** and **flexible funding**, with the potential to genuinely increase young people’s participation in society.

Priority activities

- Resourcing organisations to better listen and respond to young people’s concerns and ideas
- Giving young people a ‘seat at the table’ within decision-making bodies
- Supporting peer-to-peer leadership programs
- Connecting young people to tackle issues that affect and matter to them
- Increasing young people’s democratic engagement and civic participation
- Creating space for young people to tell their own stories and use their voice

“[Core funding] would have changed our work tenfold... to invest in skillsets, test things, have money helping to keep you fed, having a roof over your head, it would have completely changed the experience [of starting a youth-led organisation].”

WHAT WE HEARD – CHALLENGES/RISKS

“There is a fine line between augmenting and subtracting agency.”

“Kids are great at detecting what isn’t authentic.”

- **Tokenism:** young people often feel they are consulted to merely ‘**tick a box**’. We must ensure supported initiatives and organisations **genuinely include and empower young people**.
- **Intergenerational engagement:** young people must be open to **critique** and **collaboration**. There is an important role for older generations to play in providing ‘support and guidance’ for young people and youth-led initiatives.
- **Scope:** this is an emerging funding area still taking shape. We must retain a learning mindset, consistently test our ideas and define this focus area to ensure we are playing the best role to support well-aligned organisations.
- **Diversity matters:** young people are not a homogenous group. We are committed to supporting organisations and initiatives that work with and empower young people with complex needs and diverse backgrounds.
- **Comfort zones:** young people’s ideas and models for change can seem **new, unfamiliar** and even **radical**. We should be open to having conversations about requests and organisations outside our comfort zone, while maintaining our commitment to **logical, demand-driven** and **evidence-based** work.

“[Young people] need to be supported and scaffolded with their ideas, we need to make sure we’re pushing and challenging them to think everything through.”

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

“We want to show [other young people] that young people are doers... there’s not a prerequisite level of experience. You don’t have to have a [university] degree to take action... you can do that as a young person.”

WHY ‘Contributing to society’?

Young people want to make a difference and see their impact on the world. However, they often feel undervalued and sidelined from decisions on the policies and practices that affect their lives. The young people most impacted by compounding challenges and government policy are traditionally the groups that are most under-represented.

By recognising young people as experts in their own lives, we value and encourage their contributions to society. Moreover, evidence tells us that when communities and institutions listen to and engage young people’s expertise, they do a better job of keeping up with the rapid pace of change and design more fit-for-purpose services and practices.

However, youth-led organisations that seek to increase the visibility and capacity of young people are chronically under-funded and typically rely on teams of passionate young volunteers balancing work and study commitments. Youth-focused organisations and services need resources and systems in place to listen and respond to the needs and priorities of young people.

We see real opportunity in building young people’s **skills, capacity and networks** to create change and **increase** their **representation** and **participation** in all aspects of society. To enable young people to tell their own stories, engage their peers and lead their communities, meaning young people’s voices have more **power** and **impact**.

We seek to prioritise work that is youth led, co-designed and/or actively incorporates the voices of young people from design to delivery. We value initiatives that take a strengths-based approach and harness young people’s insights and lived experience.

We particularly seek to build representation of young people from rural and regional, culturally and linguistically diverse and First Nations backgrounds.

What we need to do well

- **Remain reflective:** the needs and priorities of young people are always changing. We need to stay up to date on developments in the youth space, reflect on the efficacy of our own approach and processes, and keep consulting young people.
- **Measurement and evaluation:** we will continue to refine *Contributing to Society’s* outcomes over the next five years via targeted investment in measurement and evaluation.
- **Identify the right partners:** We must work to identify and build connections with people and organisations that take a strengths-based approach and work with diverse groups of young people e.g. CALD and First Nations youth.
- **Practice accessibility:** rigorous and formal application systems ‘privilege organisations with lots of resources.’ Given most young people and youth-led organisations are new to philanthropy, we should strive to ensure our processes are user-friendly.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR VFFF

The consultation process provided direct insight into the needs and priorities of organisations working in the youth space, highlighting the importance of building youth agency and investing in organisational capacity.

This helped shape VFFF's funding goal and outcomes for *Contributing to Society*, alongside the development of funding guidelines.

“In strengthening a spirit of unity – in the family, the nation and beyond – young people have an essential part to play, and their enthusiasm needs to be used to the full. To help them appreciate their responsibilities to society, both in work and in leisure, and to guide their enthusiasm towards improving the quality of life, not only for themselves but also for others and for future generations, will serve well the whole community and the nation.”

Sir Vincent Fairfax, 94th Annual Meeting of the Boys' Brigade, 3 December 1976

Funding goal

Increasing young people's agency by building their capacity and opportunities to drive change on the issues that matter to them most

Agency is the ability to act, to be actively involved in shaping one's future (not a passive recipient). Agency is what young people have when they feel in control of the things that happen around them. When they are able to make choices and decisions to influence events and have an impact on their world.

Funding outcomes

More organisations genuinely embed youth voices in their work

Young people are equipped and connected to shape better futures

A greater diversity and representation of young people influence decisions that affect and matter to them