

Youth forum calls for lower voting age and seat at the table

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FULL TEXT

PUTTING their heads together to brainstorm ways to project their voice on the public and political stage, more than 80 high school students from across the Hunter have gathered at the 2024 Youth Forum.

Held at the University of Newcastle's NUSpace campus yesterday, students from 20 schools in years 9 to 11 collaborated and shared ways to ensure young people enjoyed their right to participate in government, public institutions and the broader community.

St Francis Xavier's College Hamilton year 11 student Phoebe Biswas said some of the students shared feelings of disempowerment, as they discussed issues including insufficient education surrounding human rights and misinformation in the media.

"We brainstormed possible solutions, like improvements to education around voting and human rights in our state curriculum, establishing platforms for young people to discuss politics and the possibility of the voting age being lowered to 16 years old," she said.

As a young person, she said participating in political life can lead to mixed bag of feelings.

"We can feel disappointed with the decisions of our politicians and pessimistic towards the future," she said.

"But I think there's real merit in engaging in politics and having your voice heard.

"It's rewarding to help make a difference and feel listened to in forums like this one."

St Francis Xavier's College year 11 student Anas Fraai said her group discussed lowering the voting age to 16 and offering young people a seat at the political table.

"We inherit the consequences of the political decisions made today," she said.

"Decisions surrounding social media, climate change and schooling lack our voices due to stigma around politics being boring, the lack of encouragement from schools and the lack of knowledge surrounding the rights for how young people can make their opinions heard."

Ideas were generated for a student-led statement on the Right to Participation, which will soon be shared with politicians and the broader community.

Member for Newcastle Tim Crakanthorp attended the event and oversaw the statement.

"I've made a commitment to approach the NSW Attorney General to meet with a representative group of these students to give them the opportunity to share their views," he said.

"It was inspiring to see so many passionate young students and to listen to the points of view of our future leaders in the making."

In its third year, the university's Centre for Law and Justice facilitated the event in association with Australian Lawyers for Human Rights and the Human Rights for NSW Alliance.

UON School of Law and Justice associate professor Amy Maguire said with few opportunities available for young people's voices to be heard, the forum was a link to local members.

"It's essential that we provide opportunities, especially in a university environment, for school students to build their skills in communicating their points of view," she said. It was also important to "give them the sense that there are people who are engaged in policy decision-making processes that are interested in hearing from them".

•For more pictures visit newcastleherald.com.au

CREDIT: Alanna Tomazin

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