

NOVEMBER 6, 2024

School Students' Statement on the Right to Participate in Public and Political Life



We, high school students gathered on Awabakal and Worimi lands in Newcastle, Australia in November 2024 make this Statement about the human right to participate in political and public life. We acknowledge the never-ceded sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We direct this Statement to the Australian nation and to parliaments, governments, and other public institutions with responsibility to promote and protect the right to participate for all people. We also share this Statement with the United Nations and people around the world. We hope other young people will connect with our voices.



Where does the right to participate in political and public life come from?

The right of all people to participate in political and public life is protected under international law:

- Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees every citizen the right to participate in public affairs, vote, and be elected at genuine periodic elections, and have access to public service on general terms of equality.
- Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women obligates states to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life, ensuring women can vote, hold public office, and participate in non-governmental organisations.
- Article 5 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination commits states to prohibit and eliminate racial discrimination in all its forms and guarantee the right of everyone to participate in public life.
- Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability ensures that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, including the right to vote and be elected.



What does the right to participate include?

The right to participate relies on access to knowledge that enables our participation. Facts and ideas should be authentically represented, and young people should be able to have confidence in the information available to them. Accessible communication advances the right to participate for all people.

Young people want equal access to community engagement, public events and public spaces. It is especially important to create space for participation by members of minority groups, for example Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability and who are neurodiverse, people who live with mental health conditions, members of the LGBTIQ+ community, people from refugee backgrounds, migrants and CALD communities, people living outside major cities and people from lower-income households.

Participation in political life means having our voices heard in decisions that can affect us and our communities. In addition to being heard, we want our perspectives to be listened to and considered in government policy and decision-making. This can involve representation of youth in parliaments, inclusion of young people on advisory panels, and consultation with NGOs and local governments. Our involvement can encourage forward-thinking government policy that considers our long-term interests.



To enjoy our right to participate, young people also need access to online spaces where our voices can be heard. The institutions we participate in, including schools, should promote constructive disagreement and help us learn how to share diverse opinions free from stigma or harsh judgment.

When we are engaged in political and public life, the terms for discussion should be clear and transparent to avoid confusion and encourage us to join in. Open discussion should be the norm and young people's views should be respected as grounded in their lived experiences.

The right to participate must include a right to advocate for ourselves and for others. We should have capacity to propose change where we see needs in our communities. When we draft petitions and organise protests, these should be received as genuine expressions of our right to participate and treated with respect. All political parties should consider whether their membership rules allow for the participation of young people.





What obstacles may or do prevent young people from fully realising their right to participation in political and public life?

Young people can be marginalised from political conversations. They do not receive enough information about their rights as young people, or how these change as they approach adulthood. Our schooling is not adequately informing us about the political environment in Australia – we learn more in primary school than in secondary school when we are approaching voting age. We need more information in adolescence about our systems of government and how we can prepare to be voters.

Information channels, including social media, push biased and unreliable information that is driven by popularity rather than facts. Groups that dominate social hierarchies can take advantage of this situation to dominate public debate and opinion. We are frustrated by ‘rage bait’ and the co-optation of ideas, ruining the quality of debate and news.



As young people, we feel that governments have a shorter-term focus than they should, because they are focused on the next election cycle. Our needs are long-term, and we want governments to be accountable to us for the long-term outcomes of their decisions. This means governments should explain to young people why they are doing things that will affect us throughout our lives.

Young people need to see political concepts explained in accessible language. We do not feel that we have good access to our political leaders. This means we can feel like we are not represented because we do not have a vote. We also sometimes find that our free expressions are regarded as complaints rather than legitimate contributions to public debate.





Generational divides can make young people feel that their perspectives will not be considered by those in power. The stereotype that young people lack real-world life experience is very limiting – young people are very aware of the significant challenges affecting the world, including climate change, global conflicts, and cost of living crises. We want to be taken seriously.

It can be demoralising for young people to see suppressive responses to environmental protests, when we understand the extent to which our climate faces crisis. We deserve to live in a society where diverse views can be openly shared and debated, rather than shut down. Too often young people are hesitant to share their opinions because they fear negative responses.





In our daily lives, many of us experience peer pressure that impacts our confidence to participate in public discussions. For those of us who are politically engaged, it can be hard to encourage our peers to tune in to important issues, especially where young people receive the message that politics is not their domain. Student representative councils operate in some schools – their effectiveness and capacity to represent diverse views varies widely. Young people from minority and marginalised communities, including First Nations young people and people from low-income backgrounds, may feel even more distant from opportunities to make a difference in society. Some schools restrict our intellectual freedom rather than encouraging us to improve the quality of public debate through free expression and respectful disagreement.





What should governments, public institutions (e.g. schools) and the broader community do to ensure that young people can enjoy their right to participation in political and public life?

As young people, we welcome opportunities such as public forums to build our understanding about our rights and our capacity to participate in our communities. We would like to see leaders working to encourage youth participation and promoting youth-led movements. Our leaders should encourage us to participate and share with us the positive outcomes possible when we share our perspectives.

We need well-resourced platforms for First Nations and other under-represented youth cohorts to make sure they are consulted by decision-makers and to promote diversity and inclusion across our society. In the school context, Junior Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups and other inclusion initiatives for students with disabilities, students from the LGBTIQ+ community, and other equity cohorts can play very important roles in promoting youth participation. We also call on governments to ensure that young people in detention are receiving the education they deserve and are supported to engage well in their communities when they are released.

Student representation should be a requirement in every school, and student leaders should have the endorsement of their peers and a genuine pathway to influencing the decisions of school leaders. Student elections can be a valuable means of learning about the political process. Young people should be able to see how consultation can influence decision-making in their school settings and should have channels of communication with the broader community beyond their schools. Roll call classes can be used as opportunities to promote broad participation.



School curriculum should be designed to inform us of our rights and show us how our participation can make positive change in our communities. Teachers should be supported to facilitate open discussions, rather than expected to keep politics out of classrooms. By normalising opportunities for students to respectfully disagree in safe classroom spaces, we can promote higher quality public debate that will benefit the whole society. We would also welcome more opportunities for community members to visit us in our schools and share their diverse experiences and perspectives on how we can promote a better society.

Given the disparities in funding across schools and systems, young people want to know where education funding is being spent and what governments are doing to make quality education equally accessible to all young people.

Education and parliament-led initiatives can help to close generational divides. Parliaments and local governments can offer more access to young people and encourage their direct involvement, particularly for young people who live outside major urban areas. We would like to see governments celebrating how well they involve us in their work and encouraging us to be well informed as future voters – this should be a policy goal for our institutions.

When young people provide input to public processes and debates, they should receive feedback that demonstrates how their views are considered and respected. Effective use of media and social media is important to build connections between governments and young people. When young people express themselves, including through peaceful protest, governments should take the opportunity to engage with, respect, and learn from what we have to say. We have things to teach the broader community, including about inclusion and care for the environment.



We encourage parliaments to consider what society could gain by lowering the voting age. We endorse the Make It 16 campaign and believe it is both reasonable and important to allow voluntary voting for 16- and 17-year-olds. We also call for legislation to make it obligatory that governments consult with young people about major policies that will impact their lives. We want to be politically literate and see ourselves represented in decision-making bodies at all levels.

Governments need to understand our lives. We deserve protection from censorship, misinformation and disinformation, as well as content on social media that spreads prejudice. But we are growing up in a digital world and need training in how to navigate that world in healthy ways. This includes consistent training in critical thinking skills, including in relation to fact checking information we receive.

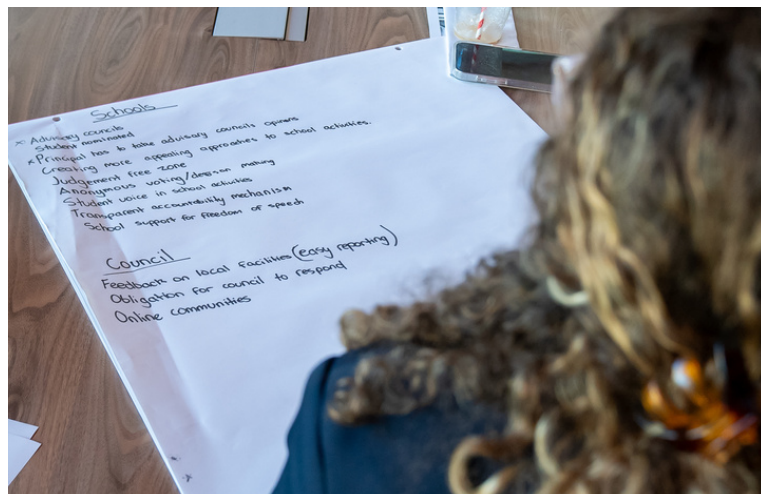




This Statement was drafted and adopted at a gathering of 80 students from 17 diverse high schools in the Newcastle and Hunter region of New South Wales, on 6 November 2024. It reflects the views expressed by the students in their Youth Forum on the right to participate in political and public life.

The Forum was hosted by the Centre for Law and Social Justice at the University of Newcastle, Australia, in association with the Human Rights for New South Wales Alliance and Australian Lawyers for Human Rights.







The following schools participated in the Youth Forum on the Right to Participate in Public and Political Life:

Bishop Tyrrell Anglican College
Callaghan College (Waratah)
Callaghan College (Jesmond)
Catherine McAuley College
Hunter River High School
Hunter School of the Performing Arts
Lambton High School
Macquarie College
Merewether High School
St Francis Xavier's College (Hamilton)
St Mary's High School (Gateshead)
St Joseph's College (Lochinvar)
St Pius X High School (Adamstown)
Singleton High School
Tomaree High School
Toronto High School
Whitebridge High School



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