

The AYAC Definition of Youth Work in Australia

December 2013
(revised)

Introduction

In early 2013, AYAC began work to provide a nationally agreed definition of youth work in Australia. The establishment of a national definition has long been acknowledged by the sector as desirable - an aspiration that again came through strongly in the survey results from the [AYAC National Snapshot of Youth Work 2013](#).

The definition clearly articulates the core attributes of youth work and differentiates youth work from other disciplines that work with young people. While their work is often invaluable, the approaches that lay at the heart of youth work are important in achieving outcomes for young people and must be promoted.

While flexibility will always exist in how youth workers conduct themselves in particular situations, the articulation of core youth work elements means that AYAC and the sector are in a stronger position to face the many challenges that lay ahead, with a clear foundational statement upon which we can build work to progress and support the youth work sector over the coming years.

Context

Youth work in Australia is at a crossroads, with education and training in decline, youth worker roles being subsumed into broader occupations and professions, occupational shortages (especially in rural and remote areas) and lack of coherent career pathways for youth workers.

There is also the absence of a shared identity for youth workers, and no previously agreed national definition of youth work that recognises and articulates the unique and essential service that youth work contributes to the lives of young Australians.

There is also a strong sense that youth work is undervalued by the general public, other professionals, funders and decision makers in Australia. Perceptions of youth work amongst these groups – whilst not always overtly tainted – are seen as often ambivalent and underscored by a fundamental lack of understanding about the youth work field. As a result, youth workers believe they receive limited support for resourcing and funding the youth sector or for making training and development opportunities available to the sector to ensure the longevity of its workforce.

Process for Definition Development

The AYAC Definition of Youth Work in Australia was formed through a series of consultations and processes, guided by a working group from AYAC's Policy Advisory Council (PAC), which is the representative body elected annually from AYAC's membership to provide the AYAC team with advice and perspectives on research, policy, and other activities of the organisation. Through this process, we have seen the sector come together to identify and articulate the common threads that unite youth workers in Australia.

AYAC developed a preliminary consultation paper, which was grounded in available literature on youth work practice, that asked the youth work sector the question:

'How can we demonstrate the value of youth work and the critical importance of youth workers for the development of young people and communities that will improve the perception of youth work across Australia?'

The feedback from this first round of consultation was distributed to the PAC working group and after a day of much debate and discussion, a working draft definition was formed and endorsed by the PAC.

The working draft was distributed to the youth work sector for review, and feedback on the working draft was collated and formed the basis of a lively discussion at the AYAC 2013 National Youth Affairs Conference with sector representatives. Points raised in relation to the working definition were considered at length by the PAC working group to form the final AYAC Definition of Youth Work in Australia, below.

The definition draws from a range of available sources, including statements from various states and territories about the youth work sector in their jurisdiction. It has been designed to incorporate elements of most use to the Australian youth sector as a whole, rather than replicating a definition used in any one state or territory, in order to fit in with the conditions Australia-wide.

The AYAC Definition of Youth Work in Australia was released in October 2013 and is a marked achievement in the development of the Australian youth work sector.

Aspirations and Review

We thank each person who took the time to contribute their experience and expertise to the process. We hope it reaches the far corners of Australia and finds resonance wherever it is used. We hope that providing a definition, based in a consultative and collaborative process, will prove to be a foundation for progress in the debates concerning the sector, and a foundation for the growth of the sector.

AYAC recognises that defining youth work has its limitations. Youth work is complex and multifaceted, which is one of the reasons there has been such difficulty in producing a succinct and encapsulating description in the past.

AYAC also acknowledges that no definition is stagnant, and this definition of youth work in Australia is intended to be a living statement, evolving as does debate, discussion and the needs of young people and those in the youth work sector.

We will facilitate a review of the definition in October 2014, informed by feedback based on the use of the definition in the real world for a period of 12 months that will shine a light on its usefulness, its clarity, its strengths and its limitations.

THE DEFINITION: YOUTH WORK IN AUSTRALIA

October 2013

Youth Work

Youth work is a practice that places young people and their interests first.

Youth work is a relational practice, where the youth worker operates alongside the young person in their context.

Youth work is an empowering practice that advocates for and facilitates a young person's independence, participation in society, connectedness and realisation of their rights.



DEFINITION OF YOUTH WORK IN AUSTRALIA

BREAKING IT DOWN *(Revised December 2013)*

“PLACES YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR INTERESTS FIRST”

Youth workers are clear that of all the interests out there, the interests of the young people they work with always come first.

Youth workers also have responsibilities to a large range of other people: bosses, government, communities, police, parents, organisations, funders and many others. All of these bodies have interests in the work that youth workers do, but young people are always the primary constituent of the youth worker.

Young people give youth workers consent to work with and for them. This consent (authorisation) is often informal, however it creates responsibilities for the youth worker to act in their interests.

PAC Notes:

91.3% of youth workers in the AYAC National Snapshot of Youth Work agreed with the statement, “Youth workers must always place the young person at the centre of their work, as their primary client”. The PAC considered a number of variations on this theme, however no perfect phrase could be agreed upon.

The phrase “primary constituent” was originally considered as the closest label for this concept by the PAC, however it was later agreed that none of these labels were useful in communicating the intention, so a simplified statement was chosen. However, it must be noted that placing the interests of young people first does not always mean the youth worker must always follow requests or instructions from young people, nor does it allow for the youth worker to disregard the boundaries in the youth work relationship.

Considerations included “at the centre”, “primary client”, “primary stakeholders” and “primary consideration” - however each was disregarded as either:

- being too permissive and not addressing the need for boundaries within the relationship,
- treating young people like a commodity,
- lacking the sense of responsibility and accountability that the youth worker has for the young person, and/or
- not denoting how this link affects the actions of the youth worker.



“A RELATIONAL PRACTICE”

Youth work is founded in relationships. It is the strong, respectful, trust-based relationship between youth workers and young people that allows youth workers to do their jobs.

A key aspect of the youth work approach is that it places primacy on the relationships that young people have, including the relationship with their family and community context, with the youth worker, and with society in general.

The working relations between youth worker and young person are paramount to the way in which youth workers achieve positive outcomes for young people. Improving and supporting the relations between young people and those around them are also key to achieving the outcomes of youth work.

PAC Notes:

The relational aspect of youth work came through strongly in the consultation process towards a definition of youth work by the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland, and other source documents.

“IN THEIR CONTEXT”

Youth workers work alongside young people in their context. This means youth workers recognise the impact of that context when working. Context includes things at all levels: place, culture, family, peer group, community, society. Youth workers don't just limit their work to the individual young person.

No young person is an island. Young people are affected by their context and shape their context. Therefore youth work must be both mindful of context and have an impact on this context where appropriate.

Whilst recognising young people as the primary constituent, the sphere of intervention of the youth worker may also include work with their families, their communities, school systems, government decisions that affect their constituents, etc.

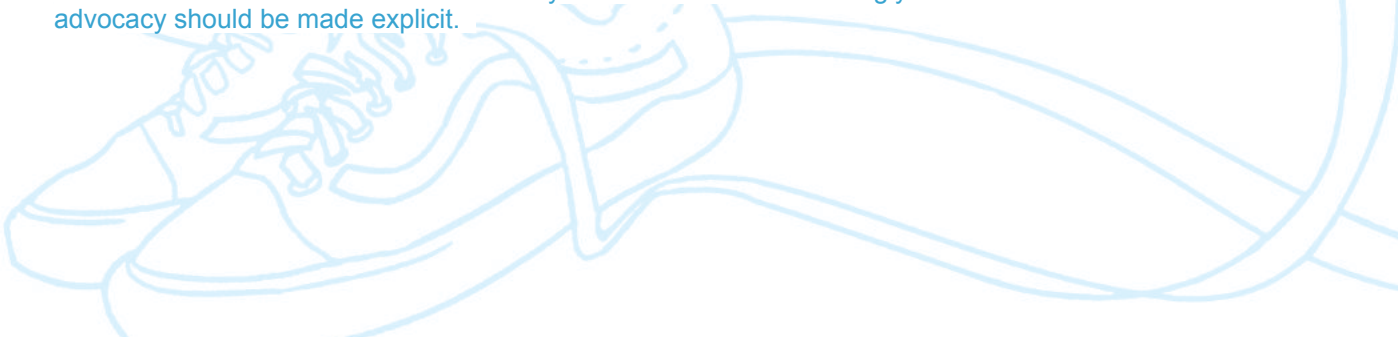
“ADVOCATES FOR AND FACILITATES”

In working alongside young people, the youth work approach ensures that it plays a facilitation role, rather than viewing young people as a passive recipient of services.

Youth workers also aim to work with young people to affect their context and this often requires advocacy work to influence decisions made by others that can have a significant impact on the lives of young people.

PAC Notes:

The previous definition did not explicitly mentioned the role of youth worker as advocate or facilitator, as the PAC originally felt that these concepts were implicit in the statement that the youth worker “works alongside young people in their context” and aims to have an impact on their context. However feedback from the youth sector indicated strongly that the role of advocacy should be made explicit.



“AN EMPOWERING PRACTICE”

“A YOUNG PERSON'S INDEPENDENCE, PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY”

If a young person is empowered, has independence and participates in society, they are able to take control of their experience and make informed decisions. They can own their identity and pursue the lives they choose. They are able to participate in the decisions that impact their lives, whether that be day to day experiences, or the decisions that are part of being an adult citizen, such as input into services, or who runs the government. Youth workers work to advocate for and facilitate that empowerment, independence and participation.

Whilst there are a number of circumstances where actions and behaviours by young people will require the exercise of judgment based on youth work expertise, the empowerment, participation and independence of the young person should not be called into question by the youth worker.

PAC Notes:

The PAC originally felt that “agency” was the best term to encompass the concepts of empowerment, independence and participation as the important elements of youth work, although it was recognised that the term is not yet commonly used or understood across all parts of the sector. The PAC also discussed the importance of a “non-judgmental” approach to facilitating the empowerment, participation and independence of young people, however it was acknowledged that professional judgments must be made, whilst not questioning the overall agency of the young person.

“CONNECTEDNESS”

Youth workers work to facilitate the connection of young people to others around them (family, community, peer groups, society). Usually, the youth worker is a connection in place only for a defined period and those other, long term connections are needed for young people to thrive.

Positive youth work continues to maintain and support the connections between young people and the people around them, that can play an important role in their lives.

“REALISATION OF THEIR RIGHTS”

Because of their age or social standing, young people’s rights are often not protected. This can include their legal, civic, economic, social, cultural, political, or human rights. Youth workers work to protect the rights that young people have and to advocate for and facilitate young people receiving the rights they are due.

This approach ensures that anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices are maintained, as it recognises young people as whole human beings with inherent rights that youth workers assist in realising.

PAC Notes:

Victorian and Queensland frameworks contain strong connections to the rights-based approach to youth work, which can also be seen throughout the history of youth work in Australia.

