Inspire Foundation 2009 Youth Participation Evaluation

Meaningful participation for promoting mental health and wellbeing of young Australians

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Evaluation Report
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Executive Summary

Youth participation is a central tenet of the Inspire Foundation. Since 1999 hundreds of young people have been directly involved in the design and delivery of Inspire services to promote mental health and well-being. This is partly based on the recognition that young people have a right to be involved in government and community decision-making and have insights, skills and talents that can increase the relevance and effectiveness of policies and programs aimed at them and their peers.

But the role of participation for promoting good mental health and well-being is not yet well understood. There is evidence of a direct link between valued participation, connectedness and mental well-being - young people who feel valued, connected, develop skills and are provided with the opportunities to use these skills have better mental health outcomes. Yet, while there has been an increase in uptake of youth participation strategies across public and community sectors, there is less evidence of the effects of youth participation on individual mental health or on the organisations and communities in which they are involved. Do these become organisations and communities that are more effective in promoting mental health and well-being in young people?

This participatory action research project has evaluated Inspire’s youth participation program, considering the role of youth participation for: i) the organisation’s participatory practice and culture; ii) service development and delivery and; iii) the mental health and well-being of participants. Twenty young people worked directly with project staff as steering committee members, peer researchers, workshop facilitators and survey champions, playing a significant role in informing and implementing the research questions, framework, tools and working with staff to integrate findings back into the Foundation. The study generated quantitative data from cross-sectional online surveys and rich qualitative data from in-depth interviews with young people, staff and adult stakeholders, as well as focus groups with young people. The evaluation demonstrated important relationships between participation and the promotion of mental health and well-being in young people in and across the three domains of individual, service and organisation:

Community: An explicit commitment to youth participation speaks to and supports organisational values and culture that in turn support young people’s involvement. Across the organisation, staff are committed and engaged with concepts and opportunities and are self-reflexive in considering their own participatory practice.

Service delivery: Participation plays an important role in the creation of services and programs that are relevant and engaging for young people, particularly in the area of health promotion and prevention.

Participants: Participation supports the development of transferable skills, civic engagement and social connectedness. Young people who report higher levels of social connectedness also report lower levels of psychological distress and two thirds of young people surveyed reported that their involvement in Inspire Foundation work had increased how much they felt like they belonged. This suggests that youth involvement may be increasing social connectedness, in turn, having a positive impact on reducing psychological distress.

The study demonstrates that at the individual, service and community level, participation plays an important role in promoting mental health and well-being in young people.
About the **Inspire Foundation**

The Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit organization with the mission to help young people lead happier lives. Established in 1996 in response to the then escalating rates of youth suicide, we were the first organization in Australia to utilize the internet to deliver a mental health service.

Our flagship program, ReachOut.com, is a proven, effective, early intervention service targeting young people aged 14-25. Launched in 1997, ReachOut.com receives over 1.3 million site visits per year.

Young people are at the centre of all Inspire does — as partners in the development and delivery of all our work. Our programs utilise young people’s preferred medium — the Internet and related technologies — to reach young people, build trusted social brands that are part of their landscape, and target the factors that are known to positively impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Inspire’s work is evidence-based and underpinned by research and evaluation, conducted in partnership with leading academic institutions and research centres.
Acknowledgements

This report presents research funded by Australian Rotary Health Research Fund. The evaluation was conducted by a team of researchers from the Inspire Foundation, the University of Sydney, Melbourne University and University of Western Sydney. The team included five peer researchers from around Australia.

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5Brain Mind Research Centre, University of Sydney

The research team would also like to acknowledge:

- All the young people, staff and external stakeholders who were involved, particularly those who took the time to share their experiences and thoughts by participant in our in-depth interviews, focus groups and surveys.

- Doug Millen and Matt O’Connor who facilitated two workshops for the research team and Professor Jane Prkis who advised on the evaluation framework and research tools.

This report should be cited as:

Introduction

Youth participation is a central tenet of the Inspire Foundation. Since 1999, over 600 young people from around Australia have been directly involved in the development and delivery of Inspire services. Young people have been interns, advisory board members, peer facilitators and youth ambassadors creating content, engaging in marketing, fundraising, research and project work. They participate online and by attending workshops and events. Youth participation is based on the belief that young people have a right to participate and that their contributions ensure services are as relevant and engaging as possible.

Inspire’s youth involvement program incorporates a range of formal and informal activities to facilitate youth participation in decision-making processes across the organisation. Diverse and flexible modes of participation aim to maximise the number of young people who can be involved and to appeal to young people from a wide range of backgrounds and interests. Traditionally Inspire has recruited young people via its website and community partners, including universities, community-based youth-serving organisations and online youth networks.

But the role of participation for promoting mental health and wellbeing is not yet well understood. There is evidence of a direct link between valued participation, connectedness and wellbeing - young people who feel valued, connected, develop skills and are provided with the opportunities to use these skills have better mental health outcomes. Yet, while there has been an increase in uptake of youth participation strategies across public and community sectors, there is less evidence of the effects of youth participation on individual mental health or on the organisations and communities in which they are involved. Do these organisations and communities become more effective in promoting mental health and wellbeing in young people when young people are involved?

In 2009 the Inspire Foundation began a research project that attempted to address these questions by evaluating youth participation at the Foundation. This report presents the background, methodology, results, discussion and findings of this project as well as insights into how the research has informed improvements in the ways in which Inspire approaches youth participation.
Background

For this generation of young Australians and the foreseeable ones to come, mental health difficulties will be the biggest challenge they collectively face. Young people are at increased risk of mental health problems, with approximately one in four experiencing symptoms of mental ill-health each year (Slade et al 2009:4). Furthermore, suicide remains the leading cause of death for 15 to 24 year olds (ABS, 2010). However, mental health is more than just the absence of illness - it encompasses well-being, and is influenced by a complex mix of determinants, including both risk and protective factors (Herrman, et al 2005). A population health approach to the promotion of mental health and prevention of mental illness involves positively modifying these determinants, risk and protective factors (DoHA 2000). Among these determinants and factors, participation is identified as central to successful health promotion work (WHO 1986, 1997; VicHealth 2005). Social inclusion, an identified key determinant of mental health, means access to supportive relationships, involvement in group activities and civic engagement (Hayes, Grey and Edwards 2008; Baum 2000; Herrman et al 2005; Walker et al 2005). Social networks providing support, opportunities for engagement and sense of belonging, with meaningful and valued participation can promote protective factors, such as social connectedness and self-efficacy, and mitigating risk factors for mental health and well-being (VicHealth 2005; Glover et al 1998; Walker et al 2005; Wilkinson & Marmot 2003). Youth participation models are increasingly employed by governments and non-government organisations as a strategy to enhance social inclusion and to obtain input from young people on policy and services (White and Wyn, 2008; Collin 2007; Bell et al 2008; Vromen and Collin 2010).

Although approaches to youth participation are diverse - with distinct conceptualisations of youth, aims and outcomes (Collin 2007; Bell et al 2008; Vromen and Collin 2010), there is broad interest in understanding the role of participation for promoting mental health and well-being in young people (Oliver et al 2006; Blanchard et al 2008; Burns et al 2009). While recent studies have paid attention to young people’s own experiences of participation (Wierenga, 2003; Blanchard et al 2008; Harris et al 2010), the role of policy and context for youth participation (Swanton, et.al. 2007; Collin, 2008; Vromen & Collin, 2010) and young people’s subjective experiences of well being (Woodman, 2004) less attention has been given to the relationship between experiences of youth participation and promotion of mental health and well-being.

Despite an increasing uptake of youth participation strategies by organisations and governments there is relatively little documentation of the impact that youth participation has on individual mental health and well-being, organisations or communities (Matthews 2001; Kirby et al 2003). What is known from existing research is that in particular circumstances, youth participation improves services and enhances their ability to adapt to changing needs (implying that resources are maximised); improves service development and client support; increases use of services; and increases participatory practice (Kirby et al 2003). Participation of young people in decision-making has also been shown to lead organisations to make “more accurate, relevant decisions which are better informed and hence more likely to be implemented” (Sinclair and Franklin cited in Sinclair 2004:108).

Researching the role of participation for promoting mental health and wellbeing

Despite rapid uptake as a practice and the growing literature about how and why to involve young people in decision-making processes, to date there has been very little evaluation or research conducted on how best to do so and its impact (Kirby et al 2002:5). Inspire’s mission is to improve the mental health and well-being of young people. It takes mental health promotion and population health approaches focusing on specific mental health factors. This study therefore aimed to understand the role youth participation plays in promoting the mental health and well-being of the
young individuals involved. With a lack of empirical research in this area this study drew on previous studies into the relationship between civic engagement and/or social participation on the mental health and wellbeing of individuals.

In health promotion literature the importance of community participation for health promotion is well argued (Baum et al. 2000). Sometimes the focus has been on understanding levels of participation in social, community and political activity and the structural factors that affect participation. For example, Baum et al. (2000) conducted a large (n=2542) cross-sectional survey in South Australia and found that individual socioeconomic status, health and other demographic characteristics affect levels of participation. How ever, this study did not provide additional insights into the role of participation for mental health and wellbeing (Baum et al. 2000). Berry et al. (2007) addressed this in their study of randomly selected participants from a coastal town in NSW Australia. They developed a questionnaire on community participation which was then correlated with Kessler’s general psychological distress scale (K10) (Kessler et al. 2002). They found increased levels of participation in particular activities were strongly associated with lower levels of psychological distress (Berry et al. 2007:1719). While these studies provide important insight into the relationship between participation and mental health gaps in the evidence remain.

Firstly, a conceptualisation of participation that reflects young people’s own beliefs and participatory is required. Both studies recognised the need to broaden the definition of participation beyond formal political and social participation. As Baum et al. (2000:414) explain ‘people can participate in their communities in all sorts of ways’ including ‘social groups’ or ‘activities that are more focused on civic matters’. How ever, while taking into account these diverse forms of participation, both studies clearly privilege traditional notions of participation. Vromen (2003) argues that making a distinction between these types of participation results in an ‘othering’ of alternative forms of participation in public debate, perpetuating attitudes that value certain types of participation above others (Vromen 2003:80). Vromen calls for future research to recognise young people’s agency in shaping their own lives and their interaction with political and social institutions and to consider sites and trends (e.g. online activities) that may signify new forms of individual and collective participation (2003:52,80). This call has been met by researchers in Australia using qualitative methods to explore how young people conceptualise participation and examine the scope and meaning of the activities they engage in (e.g. Weirenga et al. 2003; Harris et al. 2007, 2010; Collin, 2007, 2008; Bell et al. 2008). This has generated new insights and understanding of how young people participate and the meaning they attach to the activities and social relationships that are formed. However, less is understood about the role of participation for promoting mental health and wellbeing. It has been proposed that youth participation may foster resilience (Oliver et al. 2007) as well as contribute to the development of mental health services that are appealing and engaging for young people (Swanton et al 2008; Burns et al. 2007; James, 2007).

Additionally, research and evaluation often considers the voices of one group (young people or adults) in the absence of the other (e.g. Matthew’s 2001; Weirenga et al. 2003; Collin 2008; Vromen & Collin, 2010) in a way that obscures the insights that can be garnered from considering the views and experiences of all those involved in youth participation practices. Although it is important for research to privilege the voices of young people, it is important to consider the experience and impact of youth participation for all stakeholders in the process (e.g. Bell, Vromen & Collin 2008; Australian Youth Affairs Coalition 2010). Furthermore, in considering the impact of participation on services and the community we must consider young people as integral parts of these communities.

Secondly, more needs to be understood about the role of particular settings and organisations on the outcomes of participation. Research has focused on making the case for youth participation (White, 2001; Singer and Chandra-Shekaran 2006), on models for effective practice (Wierenga et al 2003) or on benefits to young people (Jarrett, 1998; Larson, 2000, Catalano et al 2004) but less is known about the way that particular settings shape the experiences and effects of participation. In an in-depth international comparative study, Collin (2009) found that having agency, flexibility and opportunities to build networks for participation that connect up with the social, cultural and economic dimensions of their lives characterised youth preferences in participation (Collin, 2009). Furthermore, young people valued environments (particularly the internet) and organisations where there were opportunities for positive personal development, building meaningful relationships with others and being involved in something that ‘makes a difference’ (Collin 2007, 2008, 2009). It is, therefore important to undertake research that explores both what young people do,
as well as considers organisations that deliver mental health promotion services to young people as settings for participation.

Studies tend to look at the experience or impact of participation in one specific sphere, often focusing primarily on the role of participation for individuals (e.g. Baum et al 2000; Berry, Rodgers & Dear 2007; Wiernenga et al 2003; Collin 2008); policy or programs (e.g. Bessant 2004) or, less frequently, on organisations or communities as a whole (e.g. Geddes & Rust 1999; Kirby 2001; Save the Children 2002). There are few examples of research that consider the role of participation in each sphere with subsequently less attention paid to the relationship between them. Here we are interested in contributing to the emerging work examining both the experiences, benefits and challenges in these three spheres that we argue are integral and inseparable when considering questions of youth participation.

The Study

This evaluation aimed to explore the impact youth participation had on i) the organisation’s participatory practice and culture; ii) service development and delivery and; iii) the mental health and well being of participants. A total of twenty young people worked with project staff as steering committee members, peer researchers, workshop facilitators and survey champions therefore playing a significant role in informing and implementing the research questions, framework and tools.

The key evaluation questions were:

- What is the impact of youth participation on the mental health and well being of young people, including their social relationships and sense of belonging?
- How does youth participation support effective program development and delivery?
- What is the impact of youth participation on the (Inspire) community? How does this support the health and well being of young people?
- To what extent does youth participation support staff to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills to work with, and meet the needs of, young people?
- Does youth participation foster positive relationships between young people and staff?

In early 2009, programmatic changes required a review of part of the evaluation methodology. At the time of design, the Inspire Foundation’s youth involvement model was based on a series of formal programs managed by Inspire and through which young people contributed to the work of the Foundation. The start, finish and activity for each program were clearly definable allowing for a neat and appropriate pre- and post-test evaluation methodology. However, the new youth involvement model implemented in 2009 had fewer structured programs and more informal modes of youth involvement resulting in greater variance in level, type and duration of involvement. This created substantial logistical challenges to a pre- and post-test methodology. Nevertheless, the qualitative research already underway had opened up a deep understanding of the real world experience of youth participation for participants, staff and Inspire supporters. As such, a cross-sectional study of current and past youth participants was undertaken. This provided a descriptive snapshot of current and past youth participants and comparisons between different types and durations of youth involvement. The evaluation questions were subsequently revised to consider the role of youth participation, with an emphasis on understanding the experiences of young people, staff and external stakeholders.

The evaluation commenced in February 2009, was funded by the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund and had ethics approval from the University of Melbourne (0825247.2).
Methodology

This project is part of the Inspire Foundation participatory action research framework, involving relevant stakeholders, particularly young people, in the design, implementation, and evaluation of services (Selener, 1997; Wadsworth, 1998; Whyte, 1991). The PAR framework is increasingly used in health research and program planning (Baum et al, 2006). In this project young people also took on formal roles as peer researchers (Delgado, 2005). A participatory research approach was considered important because of its:

- Focus on action;
- Capacity for flexibility within a determined plan;
- Focus on reflective practice and evaluation;
- Focus on empowerment and providing a balance to the research agenda of adults; and,
- Inclusion of youth perspective to every dimension of the research – particularly data gathering and analysis.

Peer researchers were recruited from Inspire youth involvement programs and worked with adult researchers on specific aspects of the research process. They included three females and two males from NSW and Queensland. Two were from regional areas and all were undertaking or had completed tertiary education. Peer researchers were involved in:

- The development of the evaluation framework (including questions and methods);
- Identifying key informants for in-depth interviews;
- Conducting, transcribing and analysing in-depth interviews;
- Development and championing of the young participants survey; and,
- Reviewing the reports and co-presenting at conferences.

Different methods and approaches are better suited to evaluating different aspects of participation, depending on context and purpose (Kirby, 2002:58). Table 1 presents the evaluation framework.

Table 1. Evaluation Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Category &amp; Themes</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Participatory culture, values and practice</td>
<td>Staff Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In-Depth Interview s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus groups (young people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>Service development, User Support &amp; Awareness and Access to the Services.</td>
<td>Staff Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In-Depth Interview s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Mental health and wellbeing contributing factors and personal and professional development.</td>
<td>Young Participants Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In-Depth Interview s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quantitative data provided a self-report snapshot of youth participation and mental health factors and staff attitudes and behaviour. The qualitative data allowed for in-depth exploration of subjective experiences and group views on key themes relating to youth participation at Inspire.
Quantitative Data

Young Participants Survey

A cross-sectional survey was administered via SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com), a host website for customised online surveys which stores and protects data on a secure server. The survey was launched in September 2009 and was open for a period of four weeks. 550 current and past participants were sent a friendly email outlining the purpose of the study, and including a link to the online survey. Peer researchers championed the survey via program sites, social media and emails. Two official reminder emails were sent, and participation was completely voluntary.

Survey data was analysed by staff researchers using SPSS 17.0. Descriptive and frequency analyses were conducted on all variables to create a snapshot of who was involved at Inspire, how and for how long as well as mental health factors and perceived impact on themselves and the services:

**Level of Involvement at Inspire:** Three primary indicators of involvement were reported: length of involvement; type and volume of programs involved in; type and volume of activities involved in. An overall measure of involvement, known as “Overall Involvement” was created by equally weighting and summing together each of the 3 key indicators (length/8*10 + activities/6*10 + program/15*10).

**Social Connectedness:** The Social Connectedness Scale is an 8-item measure of social connectedness where participants rate statements on a 6-point Likert-scale with a possible range of scores from 8 – 48 where higher scores indicate a greater sense of social connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1995). The scale has demonstrated reliability (.91) and test-retest (r = .96).

**Mental Health Literacy, Stigma and Help Seeking:** Mental health literacy was assessed using a youth version of the Community Awareness Survey developed by BMRI, University of Sydney (co-authored by Dr Burns) for beyondblue: the national depression initiative. This survey has been used to collect national data from young people and adults since 2000 (Hickie et al., 2007).

**Psychological Distress:** The Kessler psychological distress scale (K-10) was used as a measure of mental health status (Kessler et al., 2002).

**Civic Engagement:** Young people were asked their frequency of involvement in 15 different types of community groups or organisations (e.g., youth, sporting, online community, environmental, human rights, political). This scale was developed from Vromen (2003).

**Retrospective self-assessment of impact of participation:** Young people were asked to retrospectively rate how participating at Inspire impacted on their knowledge and skills (professional and help-seeking), confidence, involvement in other organisations and sense of belonging. A 5-point Likert-scale (“Increased a lot” to “Decreased a lot” with option to select “don’t know”).

A proxy measure for impact, ‘Overall Perceived Impact’, was created by summing the responses to individual impact items, where: Increased a lot = +2; Increased somewhat = +1; No change = 0; Decreased somewhat = -1; Decreased a lot = -2 and Don’t know = excluded from analysis.
Participants

Of the 550 who were sent the email invitation to participate 131 consented to completing the survey, of which 17 did not go on to answer any further questions, and were removed from further analyses. Sample sizes varied across questions as individual analyses did not include missing data.

Nearly half (45.6%) of respondents were aged 19-22, followed by 25.4% aged 23-25 years (Figure 1). The gender distribution of participants was skewed, with 75% of respondents identifying as female and 25% as male (none selected ‘other’).

The majority were living in Australia (92.9%) and eight respondents reported living overseas in the United States of America, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Thailand, Singapore and Norway.

A small proportion (1.8%) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The majority of participants only spoke English at home (86%) with Arabic (4.4%), Mandarin or Cantonese (3.6%) and Dutch, French, Greek, Italian, Malay, Tagalog and Turkish (total 4.3%) reported as other languages spoken.

![Figure 1: Age in years of respondents to the youth survey (n=114)](image)

Participants were asked to select all life activities they were currently undertaking. Many reported studying for an undergraduate degree (42.7%) with smaller numbers at school (4.6%), completing a trade certificate (3.8%) or professional diploma, TAFE or college qualification (6.9%). A significant number were working (45%), looking for work (15.3%) or caring for a child or family member (3.8%).

Staff Survey

In September 2009 an anonymous online survey was administered using SurveyMonkey. The survey was adapted from that developed by the National Youth Council of Ireland (McAuley & Brattman 2002). Survey data was analysed by staff researchers using SPSS 17.0. Descriptive and frequency analyses were conducted on all variables to create a snapshot of participant demographics and scores on the variables of interest and perceived impact.

Measures

The survey provides a snapshot of staff attitudes and practice in youth participation by measuring staff perspectives on: level of youth participation in organisational decision making; frequency of consultation; perceived diversity of young people; reasons for involving young people; barriers to youth participation; and, resources for youth involvement. In an open-ended response participants were given the option to anonymously report on any additional resources which would help them to involve young people in their work.
Participants

Thirty five staff and board members located in Australia, Ireland and the United States of America completed the survey out of a possible forty seven and including representatives from all teams (programs, research and policy and fundraising and marketing). The sample included staff members at various ‘levels’ including co-ordinators, managers, directors and the Chief Executive Officer.

While the cross-sectional surveys were used to create snapshots and identify potential relationships to be examined in a future impact study, qualitative methods were employed to explore the lived experience of participation from the perspective of participants, staff and supporters of the Inspire Foundation.

Qualitative Data

Peer researchers were particularly involved in the gathering and analysis of qualitative data. They attended two workshops with staff researchers which were facilitated by two young people. At the first workshop the team refined the evaluation aims and framework, designed the interview schedules, developed qualitative research skills, identified key informants for interview and planned timeframes for field work. At the second workshop collaborative analysis was undertaken on interview transcripts as described below.

In-depth Interviews

Interviews were conducted during June and July 2009. A total of eighteen interviews were conducted with seven young people, nine Inspire staff and two supporters (from organisations that donate to Inspire Foundation). Two were male and sixteen were female. Interviews were conducted by staff and peer-researchers. Interviewees were purposively sampled due to their known involvement in particular areas and activities of the Inspire Foundation’s work including service design and delivery, marketing and fundraising, research and policy and strategic planning and governance.

Interviewees were asked about their experience of youth participation at Inspire, and views on the impact of youth participation on individuals, the services and the organisation. Interview transcripts were analysed by staff and peer researchers. Transcripts were individually coded by three researchers and thematically analysed by pairs of researchers in a workshop. The analysis was then further interpreted by staff researchers who wrote up the analysis. Appendix 1 presents the analysis framework for the qualitative data.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted in Perth, Melbourne and Brisbane with young people who were current or past participants at Inspire. There were a total of 21 participants aged 18 – 26 with an over-representation of young women (Table 2).

Table 2: Focus group participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time &amp; Date</th>
<th>Total No.</th>
<th>Gender (M:F)</th>
<th>Age range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perth</td>
<td>Youth Focus</td>
<td>5pm 04/09/09</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1:5</td>
<td>18-27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisbane</td>
<td>Visible Ink Youth Centre</td>
<td>6pm 10/09/09</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1:8</td>
<td>19-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Orygen Youth Health Research Centre</td>
<td>5.30pm 17/09/09</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2:4</td>
<td>21-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>4:17</strong></td>
<td><strong>18-26</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focus groups went for approximately one hour and explored young people’s experiences of participation at Inspire, in particular: their attitudes and ideas about youth participation; perceived impact of participation on themselves (e.g., relationships, social connectedness, skills, etc.), the services, the staff and the organisation. Focus group transcripts were analysed and coded by dimension, then category, then organised into themes (Appendix 1). Analysis on both focus group and interview sets of data were then compared and the corresponding and unique themes in each of the relationships, social connectedness, skills, etc.), the services, the staff and the organisation. Focus group transcripts were analysed and coded by dimension, then category, then organised into themes (Appendix 1). Analysis on both focus group and interview sets of data were then compared and the corresponding and unique themes in each of the dimensions recorded. Integrated analysis is presented in this report.

**Table 3: Summary of study sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross sectional survey of young participants</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross sectional survey of staff</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups with young participants</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Youth Survey

Mental Health Status

The K10 provided an indication of survey respondents’ levels of psychological distress at the time of the survey. Using the K10 cut-offs used in the Victorian Population Health Survey (2007) (M= 21.96; SD= 8.82; N=109 (see Figure 2), the sample was found to have on average a high level of psychological distress.

Figure 2: Distribution of K10 scores for youth survey participants (n=109).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>K10 Score</th>
<th>Inspire Youth Participation Survey 2009</th>
<th>Victoria Population Health Survey 2007 Persons 18-24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low (&lt;16)</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate (16-21)</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (22-29)</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very high (&gt;= 30)</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stigma, mental health literacy and attitudes to help seeking

When asked to indicate how willing or unwilling they would be to personally make friends with somebody they met who had depression. Nearly all participants (95.5%) reported being probably (45.5%) or definitely (50%) willing to. However, slightly fewer participants were willing to work with this person closely on a job or class project, with 88.1% probably (41.3) or definitely (46.8%) willing to.

When asked about their levels of understanding of mental health issues most agreed (36.4%) or strongly agreed (51.8%) that depression was a medical condition like any other illness and over 95% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that people should see a specialist psychologist or psychiatrist about their depression.

Survey respondents were asked to rate their understanding on a number of help-seeking related questions. Over three quarters of participants appear to have good to excellent knowledge of how to get help and information for themselves or for a friend when going through a tough time (Table 4).

Table 4: Youth survey participants understanding of help options (n=109)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not good at all</th>
<th>Okay</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who to talk to if you’re going through a tough time?</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to access a health professional?</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>43.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to help a friend who’s going through a tough time?</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where else to look for information on a tough time?</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how likely they were to seek help from a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist if they felt sad, down or miserable for more than two weeks with a response scale of 1 (not likely at all) to 10 (extremely likely). 31.8% of respondents responded in the 1-3 range; 31% in the middle ranges of 4-7; 37.3% in the upper ranges of 8-10. Importantly, over half (52.8%) of all respondents rated that they were more likely (scores 1-5) than unlikely (scores 6-10) to seek help.

Social Connectedness

Scores on the social connectedness scale can range from 8-48. The average score for this sample was 36.63 (SD=10.25; n=111) and the distribution was negatively skewed (figure 3). Over 12% scored below 23, indicating a very low sense of connectedness to others amongst this group. Although little comparative data is available, a study using American university sample found a similar average social connectedness score of 38.85 (SD=8.09) (Lee and Robbins 1995).
As the survey targeted young people who had been involved with Inspire during the past ten years, length of involvement varied from one to eight years with a broad spread across the range. Significant numbers reported having been involved with Inspire, with the remaining 41.2% no longer involved. Respondents had been involved with Inspire for lengths of time ranging from one to eight years with a broad spread across the range. Significant numbers reported having been involved in the work of Inspire for many years with 52% reportedly involved for more than five years.

Dimensions of participation at Inspire

Young people’s participation at Inspire was measured using 3 primary indicators: length of involvement (in years); number of programs involved in; and, number of activities involved in.

Length of involvement

As the survey targeted young people who had been involved with Inspire during the past ten years, length of involvement was retrospective for some participants (Figure 4). At the time of the survey, 58.8% were still involved with Inspire, with the remaining 41.2% no longer involved. Respondents had been involved with Inspire for lengths of time ranging from one to eight years with a broad spread across the range. Significant numbers reported having been involved in the work of Inspire for many years with 52% reportedly involved for more than five years.

Figure 3: Social Connectedness scores for youth survey participants (n=111)

Figure 4: Length of involvement with Inspire at time of survey completion for youth survey respondents (n=131)
Program Involvement

Respondents were asked to indicate all the programs they have been involved with as a young person at Inspire (n=131). Over half (51.9%) were or had been involved in the Reach Out Youth Ambassador program, followed by the Reach Out Youth Advisory Boards (42.0%), being a contributing site member (31.3), participating in an ActNow ‘Incubator’ (16.8%) as part of the Incubator program. Smaller numbers had been interns (11.5%), ActNow Community Builders (11.5%), Reach Out Youth Leaders (9.9%), contributed to the development of the Between the Lines website (3.8%) or worked in an advisory capacity or as consultants (4.6%) to early programs or projects (COYAB, MARYAB, Bridging the Digital Divide and cash for comments).

The survey revealed that whilst over one third of survey respondents had been or were involved in only one program (40.7%), the majority participated in two or more program areas (Figure 5).

![Figure 5: Involvement in programs for youth survey respondents (n=123)](image)

Nearly one quarter (24.4%) reported being involved in 3 programs. 17.1% were involved in 2 programs and 10.6% in 4 programs. Only 7.3% were involved in 5 or 6 programs.

Involvement by Type of Activities

Participants selected from a list of twenty activities which were then grouped into 8 key areas of the organisation (Figure 6). Involvement in programs was by far the most common activity, with almost 80% of participants participating in program activities. Around one third of participants were involved in presenting/facilitating (37.4%) and media, marketing and communications (34.4%). A significant portion of participants had been involved in research activities (30.5%) and fundraising activities (20.6). Few had contributed to operations (16%), strategic planning (12.2%) or been employed by Inspire (5.3%).
A measure of “overall involvement” was created by equally weighing and summing together each of the 3 key indicators (length/8*10 + activities/18*10 + program/15*10) (See Figure 7). The mean for Overall Involvement was 9.99 and standard deviation = 5.14 (n=117). Although a positive skew is evident, skewness and kurtosis are acceptable, and the score distribution can be considered approximately normal.

**Figure 6: Involvement in activities at the Inspire Foundation for youth survey respondents (N=131)**

A measure of “overall involvement” was created by equally weighing and summing together each of the 3 key indicators (length/8*10 + activities/18*10 + program/15*10) (See Figure 7). The mean for Overall Involvement was 9.99 and standard deviation = 5.14 (n=117). Although a positive skew is evident, skewness and kurtosis are acceptable, and the score distribution can be considered approximately normal.

**Figure 7: Youth survey participants Overall Involvements scores (n=117)**

**Relationship between involvement, social connectedness and psychological distress**

Initial correlations suggest significant positive relationships between level of involvement and social connectedness ($r = 0.293; p = 0.002$) and a negative relationship between involvement and psychological distress ($r = -0.208; p = 0.030$) and psychological distress and social connectedness ($r = -0.495; p = 0.00$). However, after controlling for psychological distress, partial correlation reveals that the relationship between involvement and social connectedness lessens, but is still significant at 0.05 level ($r = 0.212; p = 0.028$). Controlling for social connectedness, the relationship between involvement and psychological distress was non-significant ($r = -0.111; p = 0.307$).

---

1Participants could choose all options that were applicable (a total of 309 were selected), thus we can not determine how many participants skipped this question.
involvement and psychological distress becomes insignificant ($r=0.082; p=0.399$). There is also a significant positive relationship between increased social connectedness and decreased levels of psychological distress (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Correlation between social connectedness and psychological distress**

Without a pre-post test causality cannot be established. However, these initial findings point to the potential positive impact youth participation can have on young people’s mental health and wellbeing. Although young people involved in Inspire reported much higher than average levels of psychological distress there was no significant relationship between level of involvement and levels of psychological distress.

**Levels of Civic Engagement of Youth Participants**

Young people reported high levels of engagement in a range of collective and individual forms of civic engagement ($n=106$ to $108$). Within the last year over 90% of respondents had been part of an online community group, a support group or special interest association (43.5%) and a local library (41.5%). Fewer respondents reported participating in a conservation or heritage organisation (8.3%), church group (13.2%) and citizen’s group (14.2%) (Table 5).

**Table 5: Forms of Group and Membership-based Civic Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of Group or Organisation</th>
<th>Within the last year (%)</th>
<th>Between 1 and 3 years ago (%)</th>
<th>Between 3 and 5 years ago (%)</th>
<th>Over 5 years ago (%)</th>
<th>Never (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An online community group (e.g., eBay, MySpace, or Facebook, taking it global, vzbw.ie.net) ($n=108$)</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A support group or special interest association (e.g., BeyondBlue, Create Foundation) ($n=108$)</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A local library ($n=106$)</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A human rights, development or aid organisation (e.g., Amnesty, or Community Aid Abroad) ($n=107$)</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A group or club based at your school, TAFE or university ($n=107$)</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A local sporting or recreational group ($n=107$)</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>32.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A band, artistic collective or other creative network ($n=106$)</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some other political or activist organisation ($n=108$)</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A youth club ($n=108$)</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An environmental organisation (e.g., Greenpeace, or the World Wide Fund for Nature) (n=108)  22.2 7.4 8.3 2.8 59.3
Organisations or groups concerned with women’s or gender issues (n=108)  21.3 11.1 3.7 2.8 61.1
Any type of group related to a specific ethnic group in the community (n=106)  17.0 6.6 4.7 3.8 67.9
A citizen’s association (n=106)  14.2 4.7 5.7 0.0 75.5
A church group (n=106)  13.2 6.6 9.4 17.9 52.8
A conservation or heritage organisation (e.g., National Trust, or National Parks and Wildlife) (n=108)  8.3 5.6 7.4 3.7 75.0
When reporting individualised activities (n=106-108), 89.8% of respondents reported having made a donation within the past year, 87.0% volunteered their time and 82.4% had signed a petition within the last year. Around half the participants had boycotted or boycotted a product (49.5%) or written a letter to the editor, contributed to talk back radio or commented on an online article (44.4%). Over a quarter had contacted an elected official (27.4%) and 1 in 5 had attended a rally or march. All participants reported participating in all activities at least once in their life (Table 6).

Table 6: Forms of Individualised Civic Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Within the last year (%)</th>
<th>Between 1 and 3 years ago (%)</th>
<th>Between 3 and 5 years ago (%)</th>
<th>Over 5 years ago (%)</th>
<th>Never (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Made a donation</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteered time</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signed a petition</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boycotted or boycotted a product (n=107)</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written a letter to the editor or contributed to talk back radio discussion or commented on an online article</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended a rally or march</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Personal and Professional Development

When asked to rate, retrospectively, the impact of participation at Inspire on a range of personal and professional development indicators, a large proportion reported it had increased or somewhat their confidence working with Inspire staff and external stakeholders (75.7), confidence working in a professional environment (73.3%), their ability to work in a team (73.1%) and their personal planning and organisation (64.1%) (Table 7). Respondents reported the highest rate of ‘no change’ for written communication skills (43%) and ability to solve work-related problems (35.2%). There were almost no respondents who reported that participating in Inspire’s work had decreased their skills.

Table 7: Perceived impact of participation at Inspire on personal and professional skills (N=35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Increased a lot</th>
<th>Increased somewhat</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Decreased somewhat</th>
<th>Decreased a lot</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confidence working with Inspire staff and other external stakeholders (n=107)</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence working in a professional environment (n=105)</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral communication skills</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to work in a team</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Staff Survey

Practice

Staff were asked to reflect on the extent to which they involved young people in different aspects of their individual roles (Table 8).

Table 8: Staff rating of the regularity with which young people are consulted in different aspects of their individual jobs (N=35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Most often (%)</th>
<th>Often (%)</th>
<th>Sometimes (%)</th>
<th>Not often (%)</th>
<th>Never (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operationalisation</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation &amp; Reporting</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over half (52.9%) of all respondents indicated consulting young people in relation to research projects; 44.1% for evaluation and reporting; 38.2% for planning and 29.4% for operationalisation. One third of respondents did not often or ever consult with young people on operationalisation (38.3%); on evaluation and reporting (32.4%); on planning (29.4%) and on research (14.7%).

Staff were asked to rate how often the views and needs of young people were considered in various areas of organisational decision making. Over half (54.2%) of respondents considered young people’s views and needs often or most often considered in operational decisions (Table 9).

Table 9: Staff rating of the regularity with which young people are consulted in different organisation functions (N=35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Most often (%)</th>
<th>Often (%)</th>
<th>Sometimes (%)</th>
<th>Not often (%)</th>
<th>Never (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Operational</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Political decisions were also an area where staff reported significant levels of youth participation, with 37.1% believing that the Inspire Foundation often or most often engaged young people at this level, and 42.9% indicating that young people were sometimes considered. Staff were less likely to report that young people were consulted on managerial or financial issues.
Participants identified the extent to which different groups of young people were involved in different areas of the organisation’s work (n= 33). Few respondents considered all young people to be involved in any dimension of organisational decision making, with only 6.1% of respondents considering all young people to be involved in operational and political work (Table 10).

Table 10: Which groups of young people do you think Inspire involves in the following areas of our work (N=33)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All young people</th>
<th>Some young people</th>
<th>Specific groups of young people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Operational</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No participants considered all young people to be involved in managerial or financial aspects of the organisation, the majority of respondents (78.8%) believed only specific groups of young people were involved in managerial and financial areas. Largely survey respondents believed that some young people were involved in operational (66.7%) and political (54.5%) work.

**Attitudes**

Respondents were asked to indicate the significance of a number of reasons for involving young people at Inspire. All participants (100%) believed that a significant or very significant reason for involving young people at Inspire was because young people engage more with services if they are consulted (Table 11). Reasons thought to be significant or very significant for engaging young people were because young people have a right to be consulted (94.2%); the experience of consultation is a source of valuable learning for young people 94.1% and young people have insights and perspectives to offer that are different from adults (90.9%) of respondents. Although over three quarters (76.5%) of respondents reported that involving young people leads to better decision making at Inspire (including decision-making that doesn’t directly involve young people), 11.8% were unsure if it was a significant reason, and 11.8% believed it was not a significant reason. Interestingly, 17.6% of respondents indicated that involving young people because of Inspire values was an insignificant reason.

Table 11: Reasons for involving young people at Inspire (N=33 – 34)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Very significant</th>
<th>Significant</th>
<th>Not significant</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young people have insights and perspectives to offer that are different from adults</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people have a right to be consulted with respect to policies/ issues affecting them</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving young people leads to better decision making at Inspire, including decision-making that doesn’t directly involve young people</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The experience of consultation is a source of valuable learning for young people</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people engage more with services if they are consulted</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Inspire you have to involve young people in order to live the values</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked to assess the benefit of youth involvement for the young people involved, the projects/processes in question and the decision-making and policy-making of the organisation, projects and programs were by far the area in which youth participation was seen to be extremely beneficial (85.7%) followed by the view that participation was extremely beneficial to young people (57.6%) (Table 12).

Table 12: Level of benefit in involving young people for the young people concerned, the project/process in question and/or the decision-making/policy-making of the organisation (N=33–35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extremely beneficial</th>
<th>Quite beneficial</th>
<th>Unbeneficial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Projects/programs</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational processes</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational decision-making</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy making</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children/young people</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A small number of staff saw youth involvement as unbeneficial to organisational processes (8.8%), though most indicated it was quite beneficial to organisation decision-making (60.0%) and organisational processes (70.6%).

Of 34 respondents 26.5% of respondents identified a lack of resources and time to devise, implement and evaluate the work of young people as a very significant barrier to involving young people in their work and a further 41.2% identified it as a significant barrier (Table 13).

Table 13: Barriers to involving young people in your job. Indicate whether you believe the barrier named to be very significant, significant or insignificant (N=34)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very significant</th>
<th>Significant</th>
<th>Not significant</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Existing decision-making structures are not flexible enough to accommodate consultation with young people</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of resources and time to devise, implement and evaluate work with young people</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unavailability of training courses and resource materials to enable you to consult with young people effectively</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support for young people</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interest on the part of young people to be involved</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people can’t make a meaningful contribution in your area of work</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unavailability of training courses and resources materials and inflexible decision making structures for accommodating young people were the second and third most prominent barriers to youth involvement, with 38.2% and 29.4% of respondents indicating they were a significant or very significant barrier respectively. Barriers to involving young people considered not significant included the belief that young people could not make a meaningful contribution to the respondent’s area of work (81.8%); a lack of support for young people (73.5%) and a lack of interest on the part of young people to be involved (64.7%).

Qualitative Responses

Five key themes emerged in the free text responses.

1. Diversity of young people: Involving a more diverse range of young people into inspire would enable them to engage in youth involvement more readily:

   *In terms of the lack of interest on the part of young people one: only in terms of the fact that we are getting interest from a particular type of young person, and not a representation that allows us to make involvement as useful as it could be for us.*
2. **Time:** Insufficient time for youth involvement processes and training allowed for in work plans, creating a barrier for staff members to involve young people more in their work:

   *Being more realistic/allocating more time to build rapport and manage relationships with YP involved.*

Organisational decision making does not always allow time for young people to be involved:

   *Often decisions are made or need to be made in a very short time frame. Consulting with a wide range of young people, particularly through online forums, takes time which needs to be built into decision making time lines.*

   *Time built into work plan that accommodates for training & supervision of young people involved in projects and management required to do so.*

While all staff members understand they are expected to involve young people in various aspects of their work more, systems of support and accountability were recommended to effectively deliver a youth participation model:

   *I think there could be improvements about the level of support, to having young people work with you...It requires energy, more time and resources...sometimes it can be hard. We’re all very busy. So maybe, for instance, work plans could be written better, it’s just an assumed thing that we work with young people, but it’s not really accounted for in our workloads.*

3. **Training:** A resource to increase staff involvement of young people in their work. In particular, training of online tools and strategies was highlighted.

   *Training - this may include training staff on how to use forums, Facebook groups, Twitter, but also workshop skills. Making sure there is enough computers for interns would also be helpful.*

4. **Culture:** Having more young people around the office may help to increase youth involvement by helping staff to feel more comfortable in working with young people:

   *Having more young people around the office - so I don’t feel like I am inviting them in for a one-off task.*

### Interviews and Focus Groups

**Understanding the role of participation for individuals**

**Having ‘voice’, being heard and agency**

In general, young people expressed positive feelings about their involvement: feeling able get involved, express an opinion and have that view heard and considered:

   *Inspire actually allow’s young people to give feedback on everything and have a say in everything where as other organisations, I don’t know if they do. Inspire allow’s young people to write content for the site and things like that whereas a lot of the other places aren’t like that... I think that shows the difference between Inspire and other organisations (Amelia, 21 interview participant).*

There was also broad agreement that young people could participate in a wide range of activities, from offering their opinions in ad hoc ways, to co-creating programs with staff and other stakeholders. Young people expressed pride and enthusiasm for their work:

   *I joined Reachout because I realised they were a youth friendly service and then I’ve become more and more involved because I realised that the way they do things is not just about treating or educating young people, it’s about involving them and having them engaged in what they’re doing. I just feel really proud*
that I can be involved in something that I believe in and that I think is doing good work for people (Luke, 23 interview participant).

Young people’s involvement with Inspire was also described as promoting their involvement with other organisations or more individualised forms of civic engagement.

‘I’ve always known about it, but Inspire has given me that kick to do more about situations’ (Emily, 21 year old interview participant, Perth).

Specifically, young people identified feeling confidence that their work at Inspire made a meaningful contribution and had a tangible impact on the issues they care about. As this participant explains:

I just feel really proud that I can be involved in something that I believe in and that I think is doing good work for people... I look back and I’m like wow that was really cool like I can point to that moment and go that’s when I learnt something about me and about how I fit into this kind of grand scheme of things (Luke, 23 years old interview participant, Brisbane).

However, interview s and focus groups also revealed that feelings of efficacy and confidence associated with participation were tenuous and could be easily undermined. Young people highly invested in the program had strong, emotional responses to the challenges of program implementation, expressing frustration about the pace of response to their views:

I don’t think they listen to YA’s as much as they think they do... well like I (as sent) out an email by one of the staff members at RO, for instance, back when the changes were being made when the website was being changed and stuff, there were certain aspects that some YA’s including me agreed on but we still don’t see it today, happening (Emily, 21 year old interview participant).

Those most concerned about ‘favouritism’ and lack of recognition were highly involved and, although they were often selected and recognised for a range of specific activities, they felt sidelined and frustrated.

**Relationships and a Sense of Belonging**

Relationships and belonging were strong themes in the interviews and focus groups. Many participants talked about a sense of belonging:

One of the big advantages in Inspire is the sense of community and connected despite the large number of people getting involved... it’s given me a social network that shares the same view of what is important in the world (Kate, 23 year old interview participant)

Young people described how networks were created and enabled through youth participation model. These networks were described as important for both expanding the friendship circles or participants, as well as supporting the educational and professional activities of participants:

I’ve met a lot of young people being involved in Inspire and, like, a number of people I’m really, really close to now. So I’ve made a lot of friends out of being in Inspire (Amelia, 21 year old interview participant, Sydney)

(If it means you can draw on those resources like if you were doing something in universities you could draw on her and her knowledge and her extended network (Alice, 22 year old focus group participant, Melbourne).)

For others their sense of belonging came more from their experience of involvement as being part of a larger group all working towards a common goal. As this young person explains:
One of the big advantages in Inspire is the sense of community and connection despite the large number of people getting involved... it’s given me a social network that shares the same view of what is important in the world (Kate, 23 year old interview participant, Brisbane).

Many felt the sense of support and belonging they experienced were one of the most positive outcomes of their involvement at Inspire, including relationships with staff. These were associated with both personal and professional benefits. For example, some young people specifically associated these relationships with having skills and confidence that could apply to other organisations and work environments. However, some young people noted that staff commitment to youth participation varied:

[I]n the past I felt like there was a more ‘bottom up process’ that young people would give their opinions and express them rather than staff coming in with an agenda and young people having to choose between them and feedback only if it’s in line with what they want to hear (Kate, 23 year old interview participant).

Some young people had experienced a lack of interest, insincerity and tokenism when dealing with some staff members and this undermined their sense of connection to staff, the community of young people and the organisation in general. This undermined the relationships they built with staff in general and the organisation, as well as their sense of efficacy.

**Attitudes towards help seeking**

In interviews and focus groups young people associated their participation with increased understanding and awareness of when and how to seek help in regards to their own mental health issues. According to one participant, since becoming involved in Inspire she was more likely to ‘do something’ about an issue, including mental health issues:

> When I first wanted to seek help I didn’t know where to go. It was only that I found Inspire that opened up my knowledge to all different organisations. So to be involved in Inspire and with other organisations gave me that chance... (Amelia, 21 year old interview participant, Sydney).

It was common in interviews and focus groups for young people to identify participating with increased understanding of help options, beliefs in the importance of encouraging people to seek help, and seeking help oneself.

**Professional skills and development**

Increased confidence appears to be the major impact the young people’s involvement at Inspire has on their professional development. However, in addition to the more practical skills identified by young people, other participants referred to skill development in terms of changed attitudes and understandings that they utilised in other social situations. As this participant explained:

> I go out and talk to people now. Instead of procrastinating to set up a meeting, with the Office of Youth, you know I just went out there and did it straight away. I went and spoke about both services that Inspire offer... I’m more confident in it rather than sitting there and going “I don’t know what to say” (Emily, 21 year old interview participant, Perth).

Young people talked about how these skills were learnt online through training and participation in online forums, which could be transferred to other offline professional activities:

> Within the training you have to become aware of new things that aren’t just applied to moderating a website. They actually apply to a lot of things outside the website... I think it’s sort of gradually become engrained into how I deal with similar ideas in different contexts (Ryan, 24 year old focus group participant, Melbourne).

Young people also identified professional skills such as public speaking, personal organisation as skills they had learnt through their participation at Inspire.
I find that there’s a good transfer of skills. Like what I’ve learnt through Inspire and with ReachOut you can sort of use if in real life as well... when you’re dealing with people on a daily basis like that you can appreciate differences a lot more. And appreciate where they’re coming from a lot more (Liam, 24 years old focus group participant, Melbourne).

These changes in attitudes and understandings, particularly of people, could explain the reason for many participants describing the impact of their involvement in terms of ‘personal development’. According to this young person:

I find the way I live my life now is more - I’ve got a really good understanding of where my limits are. I know when to ask for help if I need it. I know how to better understand people when they are going through things to communicate with them in a more sort of understanding way. And get that everybody’s different and be able to read that (Jasmine, 26 year old focus group participant, Perth).

**Understanding the role of youth participation for service development and delivery**

The role of youth participation for service development was described in number of ways: formal and project-based; ongoing informal discussions; and, through research.

I guess one of the outcomes of being collaborative is that you are constantly listening to how people are responding and having the making of things change... (Patricia, staff member)

This ‘constant listening’ was described as being facilitated in part by the use of online forums through which staff and young people can engage at anytime. Staff members highlighted how difficult it was to maintain this practice when the forums were unavailable or not user-friendly, resulting in a decline in the use of the forums by young people and a narrowing of the scope of the discussions that took place:

Not having the forums made things really difficult... Because we didn’t have forums, there wasn’t the same level of interactivity. So I think that we kind of - we lost quite a bit of potential for discussion, which was a shame. (Melissa, staff member)

Staff also described the contribution of research involving young people for informing ongoing service development and updates:

The program can’t really exist unless young people are involved... I mean the original site that we’ve got at the moment was developed with, I think, over a hundred young people were involved in consultation around the design and development. A lot of the reasons we’re sort of redesigning it now are to do with the research that’s been undertaken since the initial site was developed with a whole load of other young people through the bridging the digital divide project which is basically a lot of research with young people in a really wide range of communities (Ann, staff member).

In addition to illustrating a wide variety of ways in which staff and young people felt youth participation shaped service development they indicated that at Inspire there is a complex combination of forms of shared discussion and decision making along with service requirements that staff are attentive and listen to what young people are doing and saying ‘out there’. The challenge was finding the right participatory mechanism for the service need.

Young people and staff demonstrated very strong beliefs that involvement of young people was a key ingredient of effective service design and development, promotion and use:

The young people go on the site, they identify with the language, the look and the feel and if they don’t, they can always input (Erica, staff member).

Having young people involved in the development and delivery of the services was seen to contribute, specifically, to the credibility of the site amongst young people:
I think that because we have created this brand and it’s by young people for young people that in itself means that young people actually stand up and say oh let’s have a look at this (Melissa, Staff Member Interview)

These views illustrate the ways in which youth participation contributes to a service ethos that takes a capacity-based approach to youth. This is brought into dialogue with best-practice models and evidence on effective models of mental health education and support. Nevertheless, interviews also revealed diverse understandings of what youth participation meant in the context of Inspire services:

[T]here seems to be two camps at Inspire. On the one hand, our youth involvement program isn’t necessarily to benefit the individual, we don’t ask them to get involved to have a positive impact on them. As a psychologist, I completely disagree, while it’s not our main focus, I think we should make sure that they’re having a good experience, learning confidence and building connections (Erica, staff member).

This staff member emphasised the developmental opportunities that youth participation offered and raised concerns that this was seen as secondary to involving young people in order to better inform service delivery. Comparatively, other staff members described the importance of providing young people with a good participatory experience, supporting them with skills and knowledge development as in the context of enabling them to work effectively as a volunteer, and therefore impacting on service delivery. The application of these views points to the participatory approach was manifest in a ‘listening culture’. This listening culture emphasised a service model that values and seeks to understand young people’s views and needs for informing service design, whilst looking to promote protective factors in participants. At the service level, this was understood as productive challenge – to deliver an evidence-based model for mental health promotion, in ways that are consistent and meet the preferences and needs of young people to maximise reach and engagement.

The role of diversity in youth participation was raised as key to service ability to meet user needs.

We recruit quite widely and try to ensure that we have a range of you know regional and rural young people, and all sorts of ages, and cultural backgrounds, just so that we can have that diversity of opinions in conversations so that we’re not all kind of thinking of the same thing but that we have lots of ideas being thrown around (Ann, staff member)

However, interviews revealed concerns held by a range of stakeholders that despite this, diversity was not always achieved. Lack of diversity and the impact it had on the development of services relevant to diverse groups of young people was a theme in focus groups:

[A] lot of YA’s are from the same kind of backgrounds and I don’t think we’re reaching different kind of backgrounds, because most of us go to uni so yeah… I think it’s because the same kind of people who we apply to on the website but we need to reach people who don’t apply to (Abbey, 19 years old, Brisbane Focus Group).

In other words, the recruitment of young people via the organisations’ services limits the ability of the current youth participation model to inform the service of the views and needs of non-service users. Nevertheless, service evaluations indicate that user numbers continue to grow and that the diversity in the mechanisms for delivering content (including fact sheets, video, social media, online forums and games, phone applications, content partnerships with third-party sites and organisations and integration in high school curriculum) developed in partnership with young people, have increased access to the Inspire Foundation services and contributed to a steady increase in user numbers.
Understanding the role of youth participation for the organisation

The focus groups drew out how participation was conceptualised in the context of the organisation as a community. Broadly, participants thought of participation as the opportunity to be more than just ‘a voice’ but to take part and work with others, including staff and supports, as an individual with specific skills and expertise to bring to a task. This was associated with two particular aspects: scope of involvement/contribution; the nature of the relationship between participants and staff and supporters.

The focus groups suggest that the significant depth of involvement reported by young people was related to the range of ways that young people could contribute to work across the Foundation. While participants initially got involved to contribute to the development and delivery of one of Inspire’s particular services many came to learn and care about the organisations overall mission and sought opportunities to contribute to it:

‘I would like to consider myself an Inspire Youth Ambassador not a ReachOut or ActNow ambassador’
(Caitlyn, 25 year old focus group participant, Brisbane).

Focus group discussions indicated that young people greatly valued policies and practices that created opportunities for participation in all areas of the organisation’s work and that this contributed to their sense of belonging to the ‘whole’ and not just a particular activity or service. How ever, for some the breadth and ‘flexibility’ was experienced as ‘unstructured’ and therefore at times a barrier to involvement as they were unsure of where they fitted into the organisation and what was expected of them:

‘What’s really important is I want to participate but I don’t have any “direction”. I don’t know where my skills etc could contribute. I didn’t know I could suggest something like say “hey I’ll just jump onto that” sort of thing because I just don’t know what hat you guys are looking for from the community’ (Angus, 23 year old focus group participant, Brisbane).

It was clear that an understanding of where young people fit in a larger decision-making processes was also important for managing expectations of what role their opinion could have in the final decision. Feelings of frustration and disempowerment were common among those who had been involved in discussions but where they felt the final decision did not reflect their views. However, these feelings of frustration and disempowerment could be avoided with clear communications around what role they were to play in the decision and on what basis the final decision was made:

‘If there is no reasoning then it’s like ‘well why did you bother asking us in the first place’… At least when there is an explanation then you can understand the processes and reasoning behind it’ (Amy, 25 year old focus group participant, Brisbane).

This highlights the importance of avoiding a ‘transactional’ approach to participation in favour of on based on communicative practice. Big changes – for instance to the youth involvement model generated mixed feelings of anticipation and concern:

‘I feel that as they try to expand and reach more young people they are going to reach out to more young people in a less meaningful way… this means losing the sense of community that they used to have… Staff should work hard to keep the old YAs involved so they can keep those resources in the community.’
(Kate, young person, Brisbane)

Some young interviewees expressed concern that including more, and different voices, could be done in a more superficial and tokenistic way. This was usually attributed to the level of control that staff were seen to have ‘over’ young people and the process. Views expressed in focus groups suggested the levelling of the program had provided ‘more people with the same opportunity’ to get involved. But concerns were also raised that this ‘equal playing field’ failed to recognise that many young people will lack the confidence and skills to nominate themselves for particular
activities. The key insight is that some young people felt processes had changed in ways that limited both their opportunities to participate and exercise control over the outcomes of their involvement. This also illustrates the emergence of an ‘us’ (young people) / ‘them’ (staff) divide.

Interviews did reveal that particular organisational level structures and processes that were considered important for promoting participatory practice at Inspire. For example, the Youth Ambassador newsletter was identified as a mechanism that promoted a strong sense of connection and involvement, even if young people did not follow up on invitations to be involved or click throughs to the forums at increased rates via the links provided for specific opportunities. Staff members pointed to formal structures and processes that demonstrated this: two young people on the board; and, involving young people as stakeholders in workshops on strategic planning for both programs and the organisation. As this staff member explains:

"It's not really like any other organisation that I've worked in, in that young people play pretty much the central role within Inspire... So I guess the way I see it, and this is something that we're always assessing and trying to improve on is that young people at the centre of what we do, and should be driving and working with staff together in a partnership (Ann, Staff member interview participant, Sydney).

Staff also identified collective knowledge of youth involvement, built up over the years on which new and old staff can draw to make youth participation part of their daily work, as central to organisational capacity to work meaningfully and respectfully with young people. As this staff member explained:

There's guidelines and protocols about working with young people, formal black and white, guidelines and protocols. But also it's the atmosphere, and the culture, "this is what we do"... if you've never done it before you learn it when you get here. Just like I have, when I came here, I learned these values by participating, observing, being involved depending on what the circumstance was (Erica, Staff Member Interview ed)

Cultural benefits of youth participation for the organisation were described in terms of building a sense of fun, authenticity and honesty and perpetuating appreciation of and commitment to youth participation. In one focus group, participants stated that youth participation has to be learnt through experience rather than training.

A number of tangible and direct benefits of youth participation identified at the organisational level included increasing the organisational understanding of the technology available to young people and their uptake of it - particularly in the context of mental health difficulties. This was an area identified by staff as being under researched in Australia and, as such, where they saw there being significant capacity-building benefits to the organisation. As this staff member explains:

I think that in terms of the development of digital technology and working in the space, it is really important to have your user group constantly keeping you in check, in terms of actually that - the design is dictated by the need, because it is too easy to go up and spend money on things that look shiny but aren’t necessarily useful and aren’t going to be utilised and sort of divert attention away from—like you have to— it is very hard to not get carried away by the technology to actually stay true to the function and what you are trying to achieve (Rosalind, Staff Member Interview).

Interviewees felt that youth involvement played an important role in keeping the organisation mission focused. As this staff member explains:

So it does give you that added confidence and reassurance and I guess it helps you be excited about what you are going to deliver (Patricia, Staff Member Interview).

This was particularly important regarding perceptions of young people experiencing mental health issues as well as the commitment of supporters to the organisation and its mission.
Discussion

This study has evidenced a number of important insights into who participates in the work of the Inspire Foundation and explored what impact participation had on participants, the ways in which youth participation supported program development and delivery and the organisation, particularly the relationships between young people and staff and the participatory culture of the organisation. This section will conclude by highlighting the complex connections observed between participation in different spheres (individual, service, organisation). The data pointed to a number of interconnected issues that may affect the experience, impact and role of participation in any sphere.

Individual

Young people reported a strong sense of involvement in Inspire with strongly links to the development and delivery of services and organisational operations and strategy. In general, young people and staff reported a central role for young people in decision making, particularly in services and research. Opportunities for young people to contribute to decision making at all levels of the organisation were identified, although questions were raised about the diversity of participants and the extent to which diverse opportunities were available to all young people, or a select group. Additionally, young people felt they were shaping the agendas of the organisation by informing the underlying knowledge and assumptions about what matters in young people’s lives and their experiences of mental health. Young people could see here their opinions were included – or not. And whilst improvements could be made, there was broad agreement that at an individual and group level, young people were deeply involved in decision making at Inspire.

Of the hundreds of young people who have participated in the work of the Inspire Foundation a relatively homogenous group has remained closely connected and involved over time. While generally understood to have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing there is also potential for young people to experience burn-out or emotional stress related to ‘over engagement’ in participatory activities (Jones, 2004: 123). However, this evaluation indicates that at least some young people can maintain high levels of involvement without negative effects on their mental health except where they cannot be involved as they would otherwise like. This may be the result of high levels of involvement creating high levels of attachment.

The cross-sectional survey indicated that, whilst there was no obvious correlation between involvement and low levels of psychological distress, there was a positive relationship between involvement and social connectedness. Furthermore, social connectedness and low psychological distress are positively correlated suggesting that where youth participation actively facilitates and promotes a sense of connectedness to others, it can have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing. Participants – both youth and adult – valued connecting with each other, and highlighted trust, recognition and acknowledgement as important aspects of the lived experience of these relationships. The study demonstrated the importance of exploring the nuances of social connectedness to determine what is meant by a ‘sense of belonging’ or the feelings associated with social bonds between individuals (Lee & Robbins, 1995). The qualitative data found young people experience social connectedness in a number of different ways that have a relationship to overall mental health and wellbeing.

The first was that most closely related to Lee and Robbin’s notion of sense of belonging. Young people spoke of the ‘friendships’ they had developed with other young people and ‘rapport’ with staff members. They valued these connections for the feelings of mutual support and shared fun. The second notion was the idea of being part of a community with shared goals and values, working with others, and making a meaningful contribution to Inspire’s overall mission. Such experiences of social connectedness resonate with concepts of ‘civic efficacy’ (eg. Albanesi et al [2007]) defined as confidence in one’s own ability to positively affect one’s communities. Finally, young people also identified establishing a network of people who shared their interest in addressing social issues as advantageous both personally and professionally. These nuances in experience have implications for the design, development and implementation of youth participation programs. The form of social connectedness a program aims to facilitate or
foster will have significant implications for, among other things, the youth participation program’s strategies for engaging and retaining young people.

The data demonstrates that young people’s overall experiences of youth participation were closely related to their expectations and sense of agency. Where expectations were not clearly established between young people, staff members and other external stakeholders, young people experienced frustration, disillusionment, disempowerment and a sense of isolation. Related to this was having a sense of agency over their involvement. For some, the flexibility of Inspire’s youth participation program was experienced positively as each individual felt they could choose when and how to get involved and for what purpose, whether it be in an Inspire or young person initiated activity. However, for others this flexibility and emphasis on young people taking the initiative was experienced as confronting and confusing and therefore isolating or disempowering if they either lacked the confidence to initiate something of their own or were unaware of their mandate to do so.

The management of expectations and the need to facilitate agency is challenging but can be enhanced by ensuring staff have a shared understanding of the principles of youth participation, the values underpinning this commitment and the skills to work effectively with others. This could be supported by renewed commitment to youth involvement in recruitment and induction and improved project management (defining at the start of a project the scope, process and other stakeholders involved in the work of the foundation).

They are also likely to be highly engaged in individualised and collective actions and associated increased civic engagement and in interviews and focus groups reported that their positive experiences at Inspire had often led to participation in other civic and social activities. A large proportion felt they had experienced significant skill development (particularly problem-solving) and increased confidence (particularly working with adults and in a team) as a result of their participation at Inspire.

## Service

There is a clear relationship between service development and delivery and youth participation. Both young people and staff reported high levels of confidence and commitment to youth participation for the development of new services and to support the achievement of program goals. There is a strong commitment and valuing of the role of young people in designing and developing the services. Youth Participation was seen as most comprehensive in program and operational areas and staff demonstrated great capacity to facilitate young people’s participation at the service level, and to hear and respond to young people’s views. This included a well-articulated view that a combination of both structured and fluid mechanisms to ensure young people are informing project and ‘everyday decisions’ are seen as important. However, there was also concern that services were unable to quickly respond to young people’s feedback and to therefore innovate in ways that kept up with the needs of young people. This was, however, considered to be a problem of funding and management, rather than youth participation.

A critical consideration of youth participation also helped identify key challenges. Despite concerted attempts to facilitate diversity through a weighted selection of applicants and collaboration with other youth-serving organisations, participants were likely to be female, well-educated, and come from a family where English is the language spoken at home. Compared with the general population, these young people were experiencing high levels of psych distress compared with the general population. Despite this, many are involved for two years or more, often contributing to many programs and activities of the organisation. Consequently, Inspire services are being shaped by young people with high levels of psych distress, but who have low levels of stigma and are generally pro-help seeking (or have become that way). This has had a significant positive impact on the design and development of a service that normalises the experience of help-seeking. However, the homogeneity of the most influential and hands-on participants limits the ability of the service to understand and meet the needs of non-service users, particularly young people who may not realise they have a mental health difficulty.
Organisation

There is evidence that extending youth participation beyond a single service and across the organisation and out into the Inspire community positively promotes attitudes and processes that are favourable to young people’s wellbeing. Community members, staff and young people spoke positively about the role of young people at the organisational level and in the community. There was a common view that youth participation at the organisational level modelled and projected a society that valued young people for whom they are. Not all agreed that Inspire modelled a more open, democratic organisation or one that was consistently inclusive in facilitating both involvement and diversity. Furthermore, there was strong indication that youth participation was unevenly facilitated across the organisation with some areas having deep and ongoing involvement (research and policy; programs) whilst others continued to struggle to effectively operate in a participatory way. There was a strong sense that despite policies and processes being in place, the extent and influence of youth participation depended on individual staff.

Nevertheless, many young people think of themselves as a part of the whole organisation – not service recipients or members of a single program. They bring skills, knowledge and experience that has positively shaped the development of the organisation and the community of Inspire supporters. Staff indicated it helped to stay mission focused and build a strong sense of connection to the purpose of the organisation. The involvement of young people clearly contributes to a culture of participation as survey responses indicate that staff largely wish to see more YP and more meaningful or deeper integration of young people’s perspectives in decision-making across the organisation.

Relationship between individual, service and organisational spheres of participation

Although evaluation and research projects are increasingly concerned with understanding the impact of participation on policy, programs and for participants themselves, there is less evidence of consideration for how experiences and impact of participatory work in each sphere is shaped by that in any other. In this project we were keen to explore the relationship between these three spheres. In this final section we make some general observations and then explore three key themes: diversity and individual worth; agency and influence; relationships and communication.

The date demonstrates that being involved in various programs and activities across the organisations contributes to young people’s sense of belonging as they saw themselves contributing to the organisation’s overall mission, not just a particular service or activity. Young people see themselves as a part of the whole. Where they felt boxed in or sidelined many of the benefits associated with participation (feeling connected, confident, efficacious) were compromised. Staff also felt that the more comprehensive and embedded young people were across the organisation, the more they were confident and coherent in their own work. This evaluation suggests that youth involvement is a magic pudding – and the more it is effectively and respectfully facilitated at all levels, the more likely the benefit in each sphere. The inverse also seems to be the case: because many participants see themselves as ‘part of the whole’, failing to deliver on a commitment, or excluding young people from aspects of the organisation’s work can compromise the role of participation for promoting mental health and wellbeing.

Diversity and individual worth

Questions of which young people were participating were raised across surveys, interviews and focus groups. Although young people spoke about diversity in terms of life experiences, world views, class, geography and interests, the high majority of females and young people who have high levels of awareness and mental health literacy, and low stigma. There are clear benefits at the levels of individual, service and organisation in promoting the participation of young people with experience of mental health difficulties involved. There is also a concern that this narrow the potential for Inspire services to be relevant to a broad range of young people – particularly those who are most at risk: young men and young people who are experiencing difficulty but are not ‘service ready’.
There is a delicate balance to be achieved between seeking diversity of input and the kind of deep insight and personal commitment that is associated with benefits in each sphere. Young people who feel their unique contribution is recognised and valued are likely to express a sense of achievement, efficacy and a desire to apply their skills and knowledge to other issues and organisations. Services also benefit from the contributions of young people who volunteer to share their personal stories to develop content, engage in fundraising and marketing for the organisation and services. Similarly, the organisation benefits from the deep engagement that produces interaction between staff and supporters, contributing to a direct sense of connection with the values and mission of the organisation. This dimension of youth participation is also highly impactful but requires trust and support – the kind that is built up over time and must be carefully drawn upon.

Fostering a sense of individual worth, amongst a broader group or community contributing to change will be a key challenge if the benefits across spheres are to be maximised.

**Agency and influence**

While Inspire’s youth participation program is based on the principle that young people are equal partners in the development and delivery of their services, power is not absent. And young people are aware of the power dynamics implicit in the relationship between different young people as well as young people and paid staff members. Interestingly, young people had varied perceptions and values of such power dynamics. Some young people perceived youth participation at Inspire as ‘flat’ with young people and staff members having equalled influence. However, for some young people an assumed ‘level playing field’ between young people and staff glossed over the very real challenges young people face including confidence, organisational/insider knowledge, ‘professional’ expertise and skills. Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010:357) have argued that participation should be thought of as ‘individual agency within a social context’. The Inspire Foundation as a social context represents and is experienced differently for different young people. Although, as a group, participants are fairly homogenous (female, high psychological distress, highly educated) they also represent a group that may struggle for agency because their age and experience of mental health difficulties present barriers to participation in many aspects of ‘everyday life’. Some expressed a preference for more prescribed, top-down model (particularly when first getting involved) that helped establish relationships between young people, staff members and the organisation.

Both young people and adults reported a degree of improvement in their skills, confidence, a sense of pride and achievement in the work they undertook together. However, participation was experienced differently, and it is possible to see that a positive sense of agency in one sphere could be undermined by the experience of exclusion and misrecognition in another. Some participants felt it was important for young people to be able to contest adult decision making structures and were frustrated when they felt excluded or overlooked:

In the past six to twelve months, I haven’t felt as much as a part of the community and I kind of been unaware where decisions came from, and so I’ve been a little bit out of touch… (Brianna, 21 female year old interview participant)

Then there were those who did feel as though there definite differences in power not only between young people and staff but within the community of young people itself. These young people often felt frustrated by such dynamics, particularly when they were neither explicit nor negotiable.

It is therefore important that youth participation programs are diverse and dynamic enough to allow young people to lead various activities and even the overall youth involvement strategy while at the same time cater for those young people who desire more structured and organisational initiated activities. Related to this is the need to balance the benefits of recognising the commitment and initiative of some young people, by using titles for example, with the risks that formal mechanisms may put-off or exclude others. In terms of Inspire’s youth involvement program, this will be an ongoing challenge as it aims to increase the number of participants and forms of involvement at the same time as maintain a sense of community and facilitate the interactions necessary for overcoming perceived power dynamics.
Relationships and communication

Inter-personal relationships were identified as key to the experience of participation but these were not straightforward. Young people and adult staff identified the complex nature of relationships between participants as well as between young people and staff as both crucial and problematic for participation. Many staff and young people identified direct contact, working together closely face to face and online, were of particular importance. At the individual level, frequent, open and friendly communications between staff members and young people were central to young people’s sense of empowerment and belonging. It was also a feature of staff connection to mission and job satisfaction. However, there were a number of examples where communications broke down and relationships became more transactional. Both young people and staff felt disempowered by the process, isolated from the shared objective and frustrated by each other. There was also evidence that where clear boundaries and expectations were not established or maintained, this worked against the positive experience of participation. Where young people formed extremely close and intense relationships the service and organisation often benefited – particularly where young people were willing to ‘share their stories’ of personal struggles to help raise awareness and funds. Qualitative data suggested that the intensity with which some young people related to staff, services or the organisation meant they were more susceptible to equally intense feelings of frustration, confusion or anger. Staff could also be turned off by a difficult or upsetting experience with a young person.

At the service level, open and frequent communication was identified as underpinning a dynamic and productive relationship between young people and staff. Both young people and staff felt that where a team dynamic was fostered young people’s views and content were most effectively integrated into the service as a routine part of service design and delivery. However, this dynamic seems to be fragile and can be undermined by a perceived or real shift in the nature and means of communication. Opportunities to engage in face to face work as well as online forums were seen as critical by young people and when these means of communication broke down – opportunities to build relationships and exercise agency and influence – there was a noticeable shift for both staff and young people.

Conclusions

The aim of this project was to evaluate Inspire’s youth participation program in order to understand the role of participation for promoting mental health and wellbeing. The evaluation finds that the youth participation model at Inspire is positively contributing to the promotion of mental health and wellbeing amongst young people with tangible effects reported in three domains: community, service delivery and individual.

What is the role of youth participation for promoting the mental health and wellbeing of young people?

The youth participation model at the Inspire Foundation appears to support the development of transferable skills, civic engagement and social connectedness. Importantly, young people who report higher levels of social connectedness also report lower levels of psychological distress. Although the current study does not determine the impact of youth involvement on social connectedness, 69% of young people surveyed reported that their involvement with Inspire Foundation had increased how much they felt they belonged. This suggests that youth involvement may be increasing social connectedness in young people, and due to the significant relationship between psychological distress and social connectedness may also be having a positive impact on reducing psychological distress. Whilst causality cannot be inferred from this research, it suggests we must explore the value of interventions designed to improve social connectedness for young people in clinical, family, educational and online settings.
How does youth participation support effective program development and delivery?

Participation plays an important role in the creation of services and programs that are relevant and engaging for young people, particularly in the area of health promotion and prevention, in two key ways:

- Directly informing program development on the needs and preferences of young people, particularly young people with mental health difficulties; and,
- Promoting ‘listening’ and responsive practices in program staff that directly translate into program design.

However, there is also evidence that the high concentration of female participants and particularly those with pro-help seeking attitudes may restrict the ability of the service to understand and reach other young people – particularly males and those who do not realise they have a mental health need.

What is the role of youth participation for the (Inspire) community? How does this support the health and wellbeing of young people?

An explicit commitment to participation promotes organisational values and culture that support young people’s involvement. Across the organisation staff value young people and their contributions and staff are self-reflexive in considering their own participatory practice.

Whilst youth participation can support knowledge and skill development in staff, there is a clear need for resources to support staff training. Furthermore, this evaluation highlights the need to build youth participation into processes and structures (including role descriptions, planning and reporting) in order to create opportunities for staff to feel comfortable and supported to work effectively with young people.

Does youth participation foster positive relationships between young people and staff?

This promotes pro-youth attitudes that support positive relationships between young people, staff and stakeholders and creating opportunities for young people to participate in meaningful and useful ways. However, these relationships must be cultivated and protected. Young people are sensitive to insincerity and tokenism and when perceived can undermine and work against the positive role of participation for promoting, particularly, social connectedness and confidence.

This project faced methodological challenges associated with an unstructured, fluid, flexible and diverse program that is not constructed as an ‘intervention’. In particular, the model makes an impact evaluation with clear pre, post and follow up phases difficult. However, further research might seek to study a cohort of young people over a period of time. A longitudinal study conducted over a three year period with quantitative and qualitative data collected across waves would provide considerable insight into the impact of youth participation on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. In particular, such a study should consider:

- The causal relationship between involvement and key mental health factors such as social connectedness;
- The role youth participation plays in young people’s various notions of social connectedness and what relationship this has to their mental health and wellbeing;
- Understanding the relative meaning and value of online and offline participation;
- Understanding the reason for the higher than average psychological distress scores of Inspire’s youth involvement participants and what implications this has for the program’s ongoing development and implementation; and,
- Begin to correlate service data with youth participation in order to better understand the impact of participation on service design and delivery.
Post Script: Translation of findings to practice

In 2010 Inspire began the ‘reflect’ step in the participatory action research cycle to findings into practice (Blaikie 2007). A series of staff presentations and team briefings took place and a key member of the research project team was made available to work closely with individual teams and staff members to develop new and modify existing youth involvement strategies. This meant that the nuances of the findings were drawn on to address specific issues. Here we share some of the outcomes of this process and reflect on the effectiveness of this process of translating findings into practice.

Communication and connection

This study highlighted that the positive impact participation could have on young people’s sense of belonging, a key mental health protective factor, was dependent on frequent and personable communication between staff and the young people. In response to this finding, in October 2010 Inspire invested in new online forums for ReachOut.com. Having been able to demonstrate the essential role the forums played in maintaining a sense of community for the young people, building rapport between young people and staff and allowing for meaningful and timely involvement in decision making, the upgrade was deemed essential to the success of youth involvement. Based on anecdotal evidence from key staff members, this upgrade has resulted in significant increase in engagement with youth involvement activities by young people and staff.

The evaluation highlighted the importance of a number of communication practices for young people’s experience of youth involvement at Inspire. In particular, the Youth Ambassador newsletter promoted a strong sense of connection and involvement, even if they did not follow-up on invitations to be involved. It was being informed of the opportunity and knowing that they could get involved at any time that was most important. The youth involvement manager was surprised by this finding as she doubted its efficacy due to the low response rate and click throughs to the forums via the links provided for specific opportunities. This is a good example of the need to understand the ‘lived experience’ of participation and the associated benefits such as sense of belonging. The newsletter had been on hold for logistical reasons and this information helped focus energies on recommencing it. Another practice that was recommended as a result of this study was the sending of Christmas cards to each young person involved in our programs that year. As one young person in the 2010 YA survey explained, “loved the personalised Christmas card...It feels like staff members really know you as an individual” (YA Survey, December 2010).

Diversity

Opening up the youth involvement program by making it less time intensive, involve more interest based activities and utilise online involvement strategies was done on the assumption it could attract a greater diversity of young people. While it is true such a model is more attractive to young people from more diverse backgrounds it failed to recognise the need to invest in “going to” these young people in the first place. Since 2010 Inspire has therefore been more strategic investing in more targeted recruitment processes and exploring different involvement approaches to ensure a representative group of young people were contributing to the development and delivery of the service. For example, in order to guarantee the involvement of young men and young people who could be described as not ‘service ready’, Inspire has invested in developing user centred design processes such as participatory workshops and targeted recruitment through market research companies. Participatory design workshops use a number of methodologies that proved to be highly effective for gathering the insights of young people who would otherwise be put off by the idea of developing a “mental health” service. Another important aspect was the use of a market research company to recruit a representative sample of participants who were paid for their time. As a result 60 young people who would not have otherwise volunteered for a mental health organisation contributed to the service and knowing that they could get involved at any time that was important. The youth involvement manager was surprised by this finding as she doubted its efficacy due to the low response rate and click throughs to the forums via the links provided for specific opportunities. This is a good example of the need to understand the ‘lived experience’ of participation and the associated benefits such as sense of belonging. The newsletter had been on hold for logistical reasons and this information helped focus energies on recommencing it. Another practice that was recommended as a result of this study was the sending of Christmas cards to each young person involved in our programs that year. As one young person in the 2010 YA survey explained, “loved the personalised Christmas card...It feels like staff members really know you as an individual” (YA Survey, December 2010).
Meaningful and Productive Involvement

This study revealed the need to address the issue of confusion or misunderstandings over roles, mandates and commitment associated with the new model’s emphasis on flexibility. The youth participation model introduced in 2009 included ‘special projects’ as a way of continuing the organisational led activities but in a way that was more flexible for both young people and staff and therefore more effective in engagement and providing the specific input programs required. What this study also revealed was the potential for these projects to provide the stepping stone for new youth participants, a way for young people not confident enough to initiate their own activities to remain deeply involved and for staff to channel the necessary input into specific areas of the service.

Since the start of 2010 7 Special Projects have been undertaken resulting in over 120 young people being directly involved at Inspire. According to program staff, these projects have resulted in tangible benefits to the service in the form of content development, promotion and strategic planning. It has also resulted in increased conversion from initial involvement to longer-term involvement as the young people are immediately involved in a tangible way.

Youth participation across the organisation

Special projects have also played an important role in integrating youth participation into all areas of the organisation. By dedicating resources to specific projects that staff have identified could benefit from youth involvement has allowed staff outside the area of service development and delivery to embed participatory practices into their work. For example, ROMP, a project that trains and facilitates young people to lobby their local governments for youth mental health has resulted in young people being directly involved in the organisations advocacy work.

In reflecting on the findings of this study the staff, in partnership with young people, have developed a deep understanding of the complex relationship between youth participation and its associated benefits in all three spheres. This has resulted in a number of changes in practice aimed at ensuring youth participation at Inspire confers the maximum benefit to the young people, services and organisation possible. In accordance to Inspire’s culture of innovation, youth participation these processes of research, reflection and modification is unlikely to ever stop as we work with young people increase meaningful involvement across the organisation and beyond.

Inspire continues to collect data, reflect and act on the findings of evaluations of its program elements to improve its practice and delivery of services to promote the mental health and wellbeing of young people.
Bibliography


VicHealth (2005), Social inclusion as a determinant of mental health and wellbeing. Research Summary 2.


# Appendices

## Appendix ‘x’: Analysis framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisation</strong></td>
<td>Increased participatory practice (as per principles of participation).</td>
<td>Policies &amp; practices put in place &amp; developed to increased youth participation in organisation; Staff and programs develop knowledge, attitudes &amp; skills to work with, &amp; meet needs of, young people; Development of positive relationships between staff and young people;</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Services</strong></td>
<td>Service development.</td>
<td>New services developed to meet need Services practices change &amp; improve Program goals met</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>User support</td>
<td>Services meet users needs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awareness, access &amp; use of services.</td>
<td>Increased awareness of services &amp; organisation in community Increased access to services Increased user numbers</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Opportunities to express opinion Opinions included in decision-making process</td>
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<td>(Young Person,</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Sense of control Resilience Help-seeking</td>
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<td>External</td>
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<td>Volunteers,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partners etc)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social inclusion</strong></td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>At Inspire Outside Inspire Positive relationships Staff Inspire Supporters &amp; YP Outside Inspire</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Civic engagement</strong></td>
<td>Increased understanding of issues</td>
<td>Involvement in other organisations</td>
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