

A-Z of encouraging youth participation

No matter which model of youth participation you employ, Step Up, Hook Up or Speak Up (see Models factsheet), it is important that the following points are considered. This will help ensure youth participation is successful for both the young people involved and the organisation.

Attitudes	Ensuring that an organisation and its staff adopt an attitude and a culture of positively acknowledging youth participation will support sustained and continual recognition and achievements in youth participation.
Budget	Organisations should develop a dedicated budget for youth participation. This ensures staff availability, promotes projects keeping on track, and allows everyone to know what the scope of the project is.
Confidentiality & Consent	It is important that all young people involved in youth participation are made aware that confidentiality is respected. To ensure this, participants should be made aware of how what they discuss/contribute will be used and by whom. Consent may be required for young people's involvement in youth participation, particularly if under 18 years of age.
Dedicated staff member	Having a key contact for young people being involved in participation is vital. Ideally, this staff member should be in a dedicated youth participation position. This helps ensure that youth participation does not get overlooked, pushed down the list, or forgotten. At a minimum, responsibility for youth participation should be part of someone's job description.
Evaluation	It is important to conduct evaluations of youth participation leading to continual improvements. This also increases respect and trust. Evaluations could be conducted at the end of each meeting, through questionnaires or through group discussions as well as annually or after finalisation of projects/programs.
Flexibility	Young people have different commitments, work, study and social lives! Alongside these, mental health issues may impact on participation. Allowing participants to take time out, turn up to meetings when they can, and choose which activities they wish to participate in is important rather than having a rigid, fixed structure.
Group size	Appropriate group size needs to be determined relative to the participation initiative. For example it is often best to use large groups for consultation purposes, however smaller groups allow for greater in-depth discussions and promote the opportunity for everyone's opinions to be expressed.
Hours of meeting	Setting times for meetings can be difficult. It may be appropriate to have meetings scheduled at different times and days to ensure that a variety of young people (e.g. school attendees, workers, night shift etc) are able to attend at some point if they wish.
Inclusion	Diversity of those participating is crucial. Diversity includes things like lifestyle, gender, age, socio-economic status, cultural background, and life experiences. Although it would be great to have a group of young people that represent your entire youth community or organisation, this is unlikely. However, it is good to be aware of diversity during the selection or recruitment process.
Job description	It may be worthwhile to have formal job descriptions for youth participants so everyone is aware of expectations and roles. Workers may share their job descriptions in relation to the task/s too!
Know your limits	Know your limits - don't say yes to projects, programs and activities unless you are prepared and able to do them and resource them as an organisation!

Learning	Youth participation is about ensuring that young people as well as the organisation receive benefits. By providing training to young people the organisation will reap rewards as well. If young people do not feel as though they are getting anything out of participating, do not feel valued, are not learning new skills or being challenged, motivation to continue will decrease.
Models	Step Up, Hook Up and Speak Up models all serve different purposes. Utilising different models at different times will engage more young people due to their different skills, preferences for participation and availability.
Nice job!	Young people should be appropriately recognised for their time, thoughts, opinions and input into the service. Forms of payment may include vouchers or cash, and should cover incidental expenses, such as travel. Payments should be provided up front whenever possible!
Offer feedback	There is no point providing feedback only at the conclusion of a project. Have strategies in place for those involved to provide and receive feedback throughout the course of the project. Feedback is especially important when the young people's ideas are unable to be implemented. Explaining the reasons behind decisions can help to generate new ideas and also ensures that participants don't feel that they have been "fobbed off" or that their participation was tokenistic.
Planning	Where possible, involve youth in the planning of youth participation strategies. This enables a greater sense of ownership and a genuine partnership.
Quick responses	Everyone is busy, including young people. Ensuring that you respond quickly to feedback, questions or suggestions will gain young people's respect and helps keep them motivated.
Resources	Resources are required for youth participation to be effective. Resources include funding for youth initiated projects to be developed, for marketing, printing of materials, food/drink for meetings, stationery and more.
Social environment	Many young people experiencing mental health and/or substance use issues may feel socially isolated. Therefore, ensure youth participation strategies have a social element (e.g. providing morning/afternoon tea during, before and/or after meetings), keep meetings relatively informal and promote social interaction. This translates into an enjoyable atmosphere.
Transport	It is important to remember that meetings should be held at times and locations where public transport is accessible. If meetings/events are not close to public transport, taxi vouchers may be required for young people to attend.
Underground	Young people are not a 'one size fits all' group. Think outside the box and underground when looking to engage, recruit or promote your service. Look for young people at sporting clubs, within the local art scene, music scene, rave scene, graffiti scene etc. Keep in mind that when trying to engage these different groups you may need slightly different messages!
Venue	The venue should be conducive to discussion (if a group meeting) and have required equipment available (tea/coffee facilities, computers, internet, photocopier, phone etc.). It should be a 'youth friendly' space and inviting to young people.
Work valued	Ensure that those participating are valued, by providing a budget, sufficient resources, a dedicated space, access to facilities, training, certificate of achievement/attendance and any other needs to ensure youth participation is not tokenistic, that it is embedded in the organisation's structure.
X-factor	The X-factor: All young people have it, but finding roles and responsibility to draw out that X-factor in a young person may take time and persistence, especially if they are currently experiencing mental health and/or substance use issues. But the effort is certainly worth it! Not only for the young people involved but also for the organisation and community.
Youth friendly recruitment	To recruit young people you need to be able to access them. You can do this by ensuring that recruitment information is 'youth friendly' (such as posters, pamphlets, use of internet/email) and provides all the information and contact details required.
ZZ Top	ZZ Top was a great band, but not any more. Music is a great way to convey positive messages about wellbeing. Youth participation isn't all about sitting around talking and taking minutes – think outside the box!