



Youth Conversations Research Report: Executive Summary

Prepared for Beyond the Bell Great South Coast
by Deakin University



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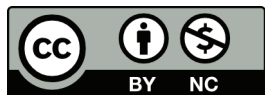
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Beyond the Bell also acknowledges the young people who engaged in the conversations or survey and the agencies and organisations that assisted in supporting the young people to participate.

Front cover: Priscilla Du Preez, Unsplash

This research project was approved and overseen by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Deakin University. All research activities adhered to the approved protocols, including those related to gaining informed consent.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands in the Great South Coast region of Victoria and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging for they hold the memories, the culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land, and we recognise the importance of the young people who are the future leaders. We respectfully acknowledge young people who participated in Youth Conversations who identify as Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Nation people.



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Youth Affairs
Council Victoria



Executive Summary

Youth Conversations was a research initiative of Beyond the Bell, a community organisation that seeks to alleviate relative disadvantage that is disproportionately experienced by children and young people living in the Great South Coast region of Victoria. During 2019 and 2020, the Youth Conversations initiative involved over 700 young people between the ages of 12 and 19 living in six local government areas (LGAs) across the Great South Coast of Victoria: Colac Otway, Corangamite, Glenelg, Moyne, Southern Grampians and Warrnambool. It offered a forum whereby Great South Coast young people could articulate their thoughts and expectations about education, training and future employment. The young people were also invited to talk about how they connected with local community and how these communities could better meet the needs of young people.

The overarching question guiding Youth Conversations was: **what matters to young people living in the Great South Coast region with regards to education, training, employment and community?**

Summary of key findings

The summary of key findings that follows brings together young people's responses to the surveys and the focus groups. The body of the report contains the LGA-specific breakdowns of the data from which our learnings about what matters to Great South Coast young people come about. These learnings are presented as three strands addressing the six research questions guiding the research. Note that the research started with questions one to four. Questions five and six were added in response to the COVID-19 pandemic after the online surveys were complete.

Strand One is *Feeling connected to the community and desirable community attributes*. This strand specifically addresses the two research questions examining:

- What events/activities do you participate in that make you feel **connected to your community**?
- What do you want your **community** to look/feel like?

Strand Two is *Staying at school, pursuing further education and training, imagining a desirable future*. This strand specifically addresses the two key research questions examining:

- What do young people want their near future to look like in terms of **education** and **employment**?
- What would help young people stay in school and pursue training/employment **in the region**?

Strand Three is *Changes brought about by the pandemic and learnings from them*. This final strand addresses the two questions introduced to the research during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- What has changed for you since the **COVID-19 pandemic**? How have you adapted to the pandemic?
- What have you have **learned about yourself and others** during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Strand One: Feeling connected to the community and desirable community attributes

Young people across all LGAs expressed a very strong connection to their local communities through common sources of livelihood and their engagement in local activities such as team sports, arts and cultural events, festivals, volunteering, and active participation in community groups. However, while young people across the region frequently identified that regional events were working well in their communities, this was not evenly distributed, and many reported a desire to see access to more events locally, and better coordination and communication associated with these events. They noted that access to adequate transport, road infrastructure and prohibitive transport costs frequently prevented them from engaging in training opportunities, employment, community events and festivals.

Young people reported becoming more aware of the role played by school and education in keeping them connected to their community during the pandemic lockdowns and periods of remote learning which prevented them from connecting with peers and teachers. Yet young people who are seeking a vocational pathway often do not feel supported by their schools and communities, reporting that their choices are judged as inferior. This contributes to feeling disconnected from school and, in some cases, 'getting into trouble'. Many young people reported feeling connected to their local community yet compelled to leave in pursuit of travel, education and employment. They indicated a need for more suitable education, training and employment opportunities in the region to enable them to stay or, if this was not possible, return. This was highlighted in a focus group with young Aboriginal people who emphasised that a pathway to returning to the Great South Coast region was crucial for maintaining connection to Country, family and culture.

Young people consistently expressed a desire for their communities to be more inclusive, more diverse, and less judgemental of difference. They voiced the bittersweet dilemma arising from a tight-knit community's intolerance to less 'conservative views' and racism. Members of the LGBTQI+ community expressed they did not always feel safe in their community. Youth Conversations data indicated that youth experiences of negative social relations could be reduced by addressing discrimination, conservative attitudes towards life choices, lack of safety in the community, and perceived risks such as crime, poor roads and transport infrastructure, and street lighting. On the flipside, positive social relations could be strengthened through more youth-focused organisations, free or affordable activities, and better resources and infrastructure in their community. The dual action of reducing young people's experiences of negative social relations while enhancing positive social relations through school and community connectedness is a critical factor for wellbeing and mental health of young people, especially in the pandemic recovery period (Cahill et al., 2020; DET, 2018; Laurence, 2019).

Strand Two: Staying at school, pursuing further education and training, imagining a desirable future

Young people consistently reported the quality of programs offered by the schools in their local community was inconsistent. This meant that not all young people had an equal opportunity to access a quality education. Some young people also identified limited access to transport as a barrier to their participation in educational opportunities involving vocational and workplace learning.

Those interested in a vocational or applied learning pathway consistently reported feeling judged in their school and wider community for not studying for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), and they often felt they were studying an inferior option. Young people voiced strong views about the need for their schools to provide a range of programs that were more relevant to their pathway interests and employment options beyond school, noting that they would be more motivated to stay at school if they felt it was more relevant to their future, and they would also be less likely to get into trouble. They consistently reported a desire for their teachers to use teaching approaches that would be more hands-on and give their learning increased meaning and enjoyment. They frequently expressed the view that they need much better career advice that would help them make more informed decisions about their possible transitions to further study and employment beyond school, suggesting the need for schools in their community to work more closely together to offer greater diversity of programs in their community. To this end they identified some excellent examples of learning programs that cultivated the motivation to learn by connecting school learning to young people's engagement, interests and workplaces in their communities (such as the Country Fire Authority).

Young people expressed a desire for their community to recognise a greater diversity of pathway interests to be celebrated as a successful education outcome, with a particular emphasis on celebrating the equal success of vocational pathways rather than overemphasising the VCE. However many young people still expressed a strong desire to complete a successful VCE and to pursue a higher education at university, often envisioning attending a university in Melbourne because it offered the opportunity to experience life in a large city, and a pathway to employment not available to them at home. Those who wished to achieve an excellent Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score consistently expressed a concern that the teachers in their school were spending too much time trying to help struggling students and had insufficient time to support their desire to achieve excellence in their VCE. Despite the perceived focus on struggling students, some young people reported that their school did not provide well for students with special needs and a differing range of abilities.

Strand Three: Changes brought about by the pandemic and learnings from them

The pandemic impacted young people significantly with many reporting a strong feeling of being mentally down and pessimistic about the future. The lack of opportunity to connect with peers and participate in the events that connect them to their communities made it particularly difficult for students living alone or in challenging domestic circumstances such as a parent with a mental health condition. Young people frequently reported that they did not respond well to remote learning arrangements that were put in place during the periods of lockdown, with some finding it unmotivating and limited because of lack of social interactions. Others noted that there was unequal access to the technology, resources and essential help they needed to participate effectively in remote learning.

The silver lining to this was that young people frequently reported a new appreciation for the role played by school in keeping them connected and expressed that they particularly missed the social connections provided by school and other socially engaging contexts in their community. A few students also reported they responded positively to online learning, becoming much more focused on their schooling, and achieving levels of success in their study they did not previously believe they could achieve. Some young people reported becoming closer to their families because they spent more time together during the pandemic.

Photo credit: Daniel Sessler, Unsplash



Nine key recommendations

Strand One



1: Strengthen and expand innovative programs linking community engagement and education provision.



2: Identify specific areas of impact created by young people's limited transport and technology access.



3: Strengthen and expand programs to make communities safer and more inclusive places for everyone.

Strand Two



4: Strengthen careers and pathways advice for young people.



5: Strengthen teachers' and school leaders' understanding of applied and vocational learning approaches and pathways.



6: Strengthen community understanding of applied and vocational learning.



7: Develop and advocate for the region's unique place-based model for senior secondary education provision.

Strand Three



8: Support young people, teachers and schools with trauma-sensitive learning approaches.

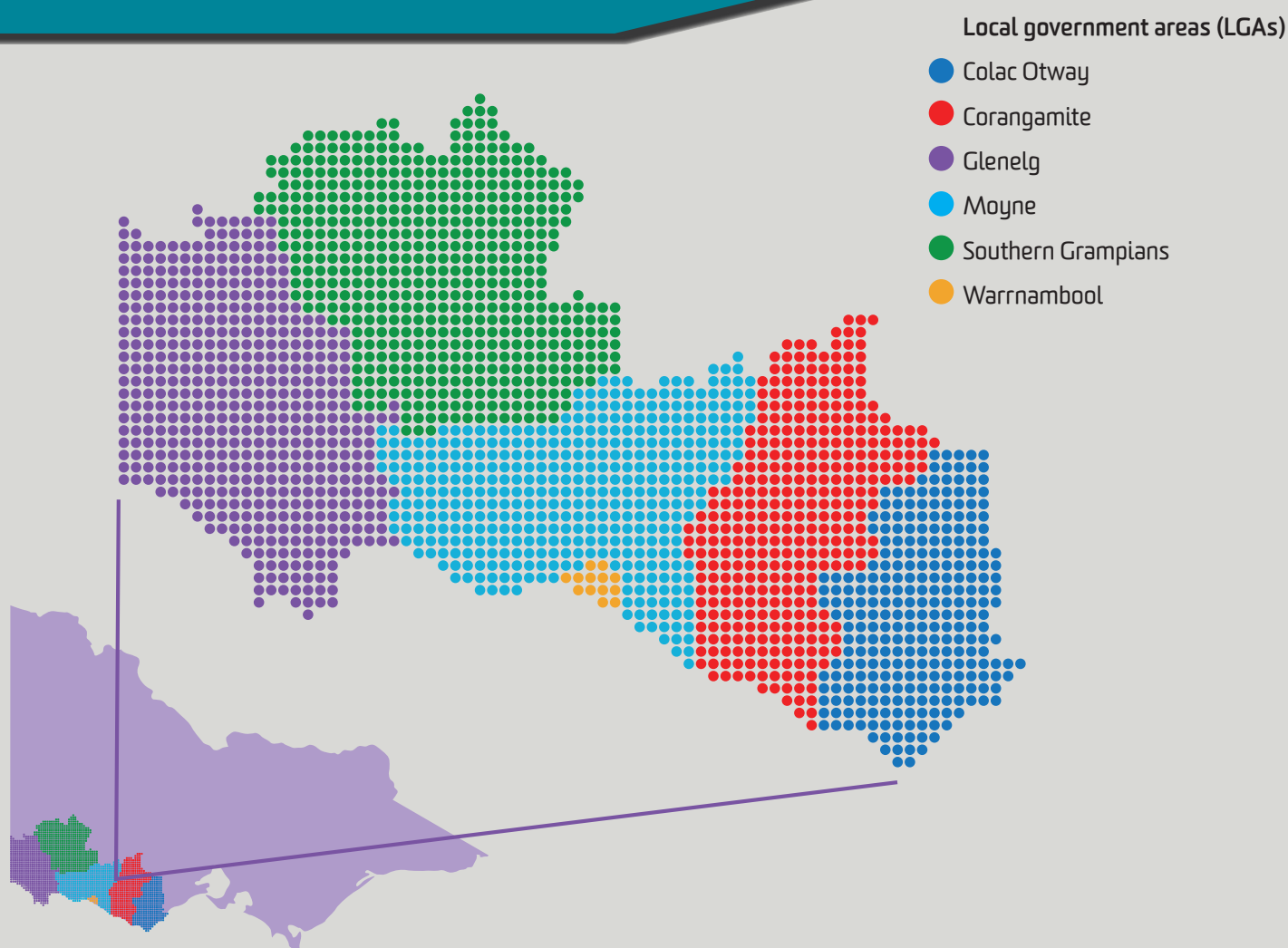


9: Advocate for sustained region-wide targeted support for young people whose educational progress has been impacted significantly by the pandemic.

Beyond the Bell and the Great South Coast Region

“One important role for BtB has been to better understand the stories of young people living and being educated in Southwest Victoria. To this end, more than 620¹ young people shared their needs and ideas for the region gathered by a regional team and 16 trained Youth Facilitators in the Youth Conversations Project.”

Message from the Chair
p. 6 of the 2020 Beyond the Bell Community Report Card



1. The actual figure was 711; 620 was the total at 30 June 2020, when the Community Report Card was published (see Table 1: Participants per local government area for details).

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