

Young adults and cultural diversity: Experiences and challenges **Discussion Paper**



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Foreword

As the future leaders, 'youth' is a cohort that seems to draw the constant attention of researchers, policy makers and social commentators alike.

It makes sense – the attitudes and behaviours of our young people provide a valuable glimpse into where we're heading as a nation, but they also shed light on how life in Australia is changing over time.

Over the last year, much Australian media coverage and social commentary relating to the youth experience has pointed to a significant shift in the attitudes of young people. In particular, relating to their growing disillusionment with our political system.

Issues such as housing affordability and violence have also made news headlines, identified as key problems affecting our young people and Australia's social cohesion more broadly.

Since 2007, the Scanlon Foundation's annual Mapping Social Cohesion survey has provided a unique insight into Australians' views on a range of important national issues – from multiculturalism and immigration, to discrimination and political engagement. When looking retrospectively at youth-focused data collected during the research series, trends and shifts in attitudes begin to emerge.

Drawing on data captured in the nine Mapping Social Cohesion surveys from 2007-16, as well as findings of the Australia@2015 online research study, this discussion paper aims to shine a light on attitudes among Australia's young people, including how they differ from older Australians and other segments of the population.

Furthermore, its contents provide a basis for closer reflection on key factors influencing the youth experience. It also raises points for consideration such as: are differences in attitudes across age groups simply generational, or do youth attitudes move and shift closer towards the views of older Australians as young people transition through various stages of adulthood?

It is hoped that through further reflection on youth attitudes, and the key factors influencing them, we can help to ensure that the challenges faced by young Australians today are not left unresolved for future generations.

Anthea Hancocks



CEO, Scanlon Foundation

Introduction

Despite an ageing population, the number of young people (12-25 years) in Australia is steadily growing, predicted to rise by approximately 50% by 2050.

Thanks to the advent of globalisation, Australia's youth population is increasingly diverse. Young adults are also facing new challenges – both socially and economically – that are shaping their transition into adulthood.

The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion research series is Australia's largest and longest running study tracking attitudes on issues affecting our social cohesion. Over nine years, more than 15,000 respondents have participated in the surveys, including more than 2,500 young people aged 18-34 years. Findings relating specifically to this age bracket are utilised and explored in further detail in this discussion paper.

In broad terms, data shows that while youth attitudes are distinctly different to those of older Australians on a number of issues, they have remained consistently so, shifting only marginally over the last decade.

While numerical data provides a precise method for measuring changing attitudes over time, the richness of lived experience is rarely captured through numbers alone.

To better understand the youth experience in Australia, and in order to begin to unpack some of the key factors that influence young adults' attitudes, transcripts of the more than fifty focus group discussions conducted nationally in 2015 as part of the Scanlon Foundation's 'Australia@2015' project, are also drawn upon in this paper.

This qualitative data highlights some of the perceived differences in values, outlook and life-experience across younger and older generations.

Perhaps most notably, it points to the values of 'old school' Australians who are unwilling and unable to understand the cultures of immigrant populations, and the openness of the younger generation.

"From work and everything... I observe... I think the younger generation is more accepting... They are... very open, they are very nice to people, they... learn. I think it's the older ones who are – not all, some – I've noticed, who complain or whinge."

Australia@2015 focus group participant



"They used to tell me that people were really racist towards my aunties and my mum because they were 'wogs' and stuff like that. I never had any of that growing up, I've always been very, I don't know, well accepted."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

Young adults and politics

Political engagement

Recent media commentary has made broad claims concerning the political views of young adults, both overseas, and in Australia.

In an article published by *The Guardian* in June 2017, John Daley and Danielle Wood of the Grattan Institute argue that young people, ‘feel(ing) let down by current government policies,’ are re-emerging as a political force.

On the basis of a large British survey, Daley and Wood credit this ‘youthquake’ as contributing to ‘a large (and unexpected) swing to Labour’ in the 2017 British election. Their analysis of the 2016 Australian Election Study leads them to argue that ‘the youth vote in Australia is skewed [towards the left], but not nearly as far as the split at the 2017 UK election.’

In the UK, support for Labour and the Conservative parties at the 2017 election among those aged 18-29 was understood to divide 60:20. With other parties added, the combined UK centre-left support among those aged 18-29 is above 70%.

In contrast, in Australia, the Scanlon Foundation data aggregated for the years 2013-2016 indicates support for Labor among respondents aged 18-24 at 37%, and for those aged 25-34 at 31%. With support for Labor and Greens aggregated, centre-left support in Australia is in the range 44%-50% (Table 1), well under the proportion indicated for the United Kingdom.

Table 1: ‘If there was a Federal election held today, for which party would you probably vote?’

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Total
Liberal	22.8%	22.4%	29.6%	31.0%	32.4%	41.3%	48.4%	31.3%
Labor	37.4%	31.1%	29.0%	29.4%	30.3%	29.2%	21.0%	30.1%
Greens	12.8%	12.8%	8.0%	7.8%	7.1%	3.3%	1.9%	8.1%

Source: Scanlon Foundation national surveys, 2013-2016



With regard to possible shifts in intended vote over time, Scanlon Foundation data does not find a pattern of increased Labor or Greens support among young adults. Instead, the major factor explaining variation over time is fluctuation in the popularity of the governing party.

Young adults and politics

Views of democracy

In an August 2017 column, veteran Australian political commentator Laurie Oakes observed:

"I see in opinion polls the alarming statistic that only about half of Australians aged between 18 and 29 think democracy is preferable to any other form of government" (Herald Sun, 12 August 2017).

In similar terms, a March 2016 article headlined 'Have millennials given up on democracy?' discussed a poll that showed 'less than half of young adults think democracy is the best form of government' (Michael Safi, *The Guardian*, 19 March 2016).

Both articles refer to the annual Lowy Institute poll, which includes a question that asks respondents if they consider democracy to be 'the most preferable form of government.' Since 2012, when the question was first asked, the poll has found a large measure of consistency in its findings; among respondents aged 18-29, in 2017, only 'about half' (52%) indicated agreement that democracy is the 'most preferable form of government' (compared to 60% of all respondents).

The Lowy Institute finding is obtained by a single question which presents three response options:

- Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government
- In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable
- For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

The key words of the second option are 'in some circumstances.' This option does not necessarily indicate a rejection of democracy.

The 2014 Scanlon Foundation survey presented respondents with the single proposition that 'Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government.' With the appraisal of democracy presented in these terms, 85% of respondents aged 18-24 agreed, as did 82% of respondents aged 25-34 (Table 2).

Table 2: ‘Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government’

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Total
Strongly agree	37.7%	33.5%	47.3%	52.5%	54.9%	53.4%	49.0%	46.2%
Agree	47.5%	48.7%	38.8%	38.4%	37.9%	39.8%	40.4%	41.9%
Sub-total agree	85.2%	82.2%	86.1%	90.9%	92.8%	93.2%	89.4%	88.1%
Disagree	11.3%	10.2%	5.1%	5.3%	4.5%	3.4%	3.8%	6.5%
Strongly disagree	2.5%	3.3%	4.0%	1.5%	0.0%	1.7%	3.8%	2.4%
Sub-total disagree	13.8%	13.5%	9.1%	6.8%	4.5%	5.1%	7.6%	8.9%

Source: Scanlon Foundation survey, 2014

In response to the range of questions in the Scanlon Foundation surveys on the working of the Australian government and trust in government, young Australian adults do not indicate a high level of discontent. For example, just 10% of respondents aged 18-24 agree that the government can ‘almost never’ be trusted to do the right thing, compared to a high of 22% among those aged 55-64. There is only marginal difference by age among those who consider that the system of government in Australia does not work and ‘should be replaced’ – 12% aged 18-24, 14% aged 25-34, and 12% aged 35-44.

Collectively, Scanlon Foundation findings point more to consistency rather than marked change in attitudes in recent years.

Young adults and politics

Interest in politics

Broadly speaking, Scanlon Foundation findings relating to political engagement point to a relatively low level of interest in Australian politics among young adults.

When the 2014 Scanlon Foundation surveys asked respondents to indicate their level of interest in politics, 15% of those aged 18-24 and 25-34 indicated that they were 'not at all interested,' and a further 20%-22% indicated 'not interested.' This equates to a combined total of more than one-in-three respondents – double the proportion among those aged 55-64 years.

When political participation is considered, the lowest reported level is among those aged 18-24, followed by 25-34. Across the nine Scanlon Foundation national surveys, one in five (20%) of those aged 18-24 indicate that in the last three years they have not been involved in any of the five specified forms of political participation (voting in an election, signing a petition, contacting a member of parliament, participating in a boycott, and attending a march or demonstration). This compares to around one in ten (10%) among those aged 35 or above.

A high level of interest in politics ('very interested') is indicated by just 11% of respondents aged 18-24, and 14% aged 25-34 – proportions that are considerably below the 36% indicated by those aged 55-64, and the 33% aged 65-74.

What more accurately characterises young adults: increasing political involvement or heightened disinterest in politics?


What can Australia learn from recent political events globally, including the 2017 British election and the UK Brexit vote?

Why is there a relatively high level of support for Labor and Greens among young voters?

How are young adults expressing their views on social issues if not via political participation?



Spotlight issue: Marriage equality for same sex couples



The 2016 Mapping Social Cohesion Survey asked respondents for their views on three current political issues: 'marriage equality for same sex couples'; 'reduced reliance on coal for energy generation'; and 'medically approved euthanasia for people suffering terminal illness.' All three issues found strong support for reform among younger age groups.

The highest level of support for marriage equality was among young adults. While the average level of 'strong support' for marriage equality is at 40%, it is 18 percentage points higher among those aged 18-24, and 10 percentage points higher among those aged 25-34. The combined 'strong support' and 'support' among those aged 18-24 is at 79%, and 78% among those aged 25-34, compared to a much lower 55% among those aged 65-74, and just 37% aged 75 or above (Table 3, Figure 1).

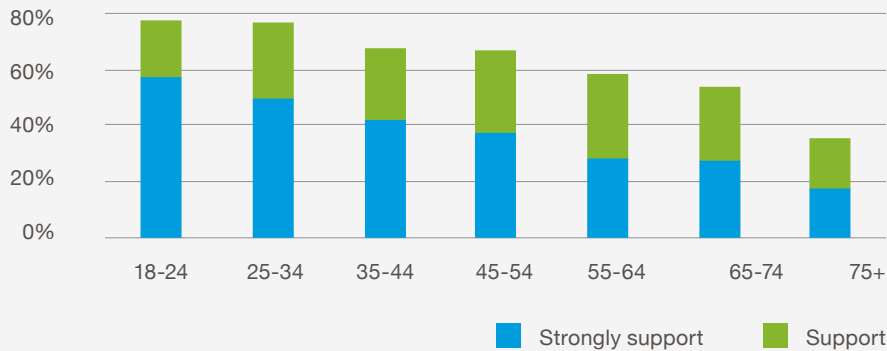
The finding of majority support for marriage equality is in keeping with a range of surveys conducted in Australia over the last three years. Such surveys have consistently found that close to two-thirds of Australians support marriage equality. For example, in June 2014, the Crosby-Textor poll found support at 72% (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 2014), the June 2015 Fairfax-Ipsos poll found support at 68% (*Financial Review*, 14 June 2015), and the July 2016 Fairfax Ipsos poll at 70% (*Financial Review*, 1 July 2016). A July 2017 poll in the electorates of the Prime Minister and four government ministers found support at 65% among voters aged 51-65 (*SkyNews*, 15 July 2017).

Table 3: ‘Do you support or oppose legislation for marriage equality for same sex couples?’

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Total
Strongly Support	58.0%	50.4%	42.8%	38.2%	28.6%	27.7%	18.0%	39.8%
Support	21.4%	27.6%	26.1%	30.3%	31.5%	27.7%	18.9%	26.8%
Combined support	79.4%	78.0%	68.9%	68.5%	60.1%	55.4%	36.9%	66.6%

Source: Scanlon Foundation survey, 2016

Figure 1: ‘Do you support or oppose legislation for marriage equality for same sex couples?’



Source: Scanlon Foundation survey, 2016

When you consider current challenges such as high levels of underemployment, a stalling of wage growth, and soaring house prices, why do more than two-thirds of young people remain positive about their economic circumstances?

Do you think that young people living in rural areas have different views compared to those in cities? Why?

Social Justice

Young respondents are relatively positive in their views on social justice in Australia, with highest levels of negative responses among those aged 45-64 years. Interestingly – even with stalling wage growth and soaring house prices – Scanlon Foundation findings do not support the view that there is a heightened sense of grievance and dissatisfaction with economic circumstances among young adults.

A general question on economic opportunity in Australia finds that 81%-82% of those aged 18-34 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that 'in the long run, hard work brings a better life,' compared to a marginally lower 78% of those aged 55-64 (Table 4). In response to a question on satisfaction with 'your present financial situation,' 26% aged 18-24, and the same proportion aged 25-34, indicated that they were dissatisfied, but more than two in three respondents indicated that they were satisfied (69% aged 18-24, 70% aged 25-34).


Table 4: 'Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life'

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Total
Strongly Agree	32.7%	34.5%	36.3%	35.5%	36.9%	43.8%	41.2%	36.6%
Agree	49.6%	46.6%	43.0%	43.1%	41.0%	40.7%	44.1%	44.0%
Sub-total agree	82.3%	81.1%	79.3%	78.6%	77.9%	84.5%	85.3%	80.6%
Disagree	9.3%	11.4%	12.1%	12.1%	13.2%	8.8%	7.8%	11.1%
Strongly Disagree	2.3%	4.1%	4.7%	5.3%	4.6%	3.8%	2.4%	4.1%
Sub-total disagree	11.6%	15.5%	16.8%	17.4%	17.8%	12.6%	10.2%	15.2%

Source: Scanlon Foundation surveys, 2007-2016

81% of young people believe that in the long run, hard work brings a better life. Do you agree?
What do you think contributes to this view?

Sense of belonging and national identity



Responses to questions concerning belonging and identification with Australia show a relatively large variation between the views of older and younger Australians. For three questions considered, the combination of the two positive responses finds only minor variation, but when analysis is narrowed to the strongest positive response, lower levels of identification with Australia are indicated by young adults.

Among respondents aged 18-24, 41% indicate pride in the Australian way of life to a 'great extent,' compared to more than 60% of those aged 45-74 years.

There is a similar pattern when respondents are asked if they agree that it is important to maintain 'the Australian way of life and culture' – 41% aged 18-24 'strongly agree,' compared to a higher 66%-68% of respondents aged 55-74 years.

For all age groups, a large proportion indicate sense of belonging in Australia at the stronger positive level ('to a great extent'), but the pattern of differentiation by age is maintained: 60%-62% aged 18-34 indicate belonging 'to a great extent,' compared to 77%-82% of those aged 55 or above (Table 5).

Is the lower level of strong positive response among young people to questions on identification with Australia an issue of concern? Or, should we rather focus on the high aggregated positive response, with more than 90% indicating sense of belonging in Australia to a 'great' or 'moderate' extent?

What can or should be done at a community level to foster a greater sense of belonging among our young people?



Table 5: ‘To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in Australia?’

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Total
To a great extent	59.6%	62.1%	70.7%	73.7%	77.2%	81.9%	79.2%	71.0%
To a moderate extent	31.6%	28.6%	23.6%	20.6%	18.0%	14.9%	15.2%	22.6%
Sub-total, great + moderate	91.2%	90.7%	94.3%	94.3%	95.2%	96.9%	94.4%	93.6%

Source: Scanlon Foundation surveys, 2007-2016

How does the advent of globalisation influence individuals’ sense of belonging? Consider the impact of social media and the internet, and the increased contact available to first or second generation Australians with countries of origin.

Immigration, asylum seekers and cultural diversity

A number of Scanlon Foundation survey questions have dealt with attitudes to the immigration intake, asylum seekers and multiculturalism, as well as cultural and religious diversity. These questions find large differentiation across age groups, with the highest level of positive response among those aged 18-24, and the lowest level among those over the age of 65.

Multiculturalism and cultural diversity

In response to the proposition that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia,' 90% of young people aged 18-24 'strongly agree' or 'agree,'

compared to 84% aged 45-54, 80% aged 65-74, and a lower 73% aged 75 or above (Table 6).

Of those aged 18-24, 75% either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that 'immigrants from many different countries make Australia stronger,' compared to 65% aged 45-54, and a lower 51% aged 75 or above.

In contrast to their grandparents and parents, many young Australians have grown up in diverse cultural environments where physical and cultural difference are normal. In fact, for many young Australians, diversity is the norm, and lack of diversity or monoculturalism the exception.

"It's just the way I grew up, ... there was me, two doors down was the Greek boy, across the road was the Turks, two doors down from them was the Maoris, and yeah, around the block was the Asians, and we all, just because of the same age group, we all hung out together."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

Asylum seekers

While a high proportion of young adults indicate a positive attitude to cultural diversity, and close to 60% consider that the current immigration intake is 'about right' or 'too low', only a minority are favourable to asylum seekers.

When presented with four possible policy options for dealing with asylum seekers arriving by boat, just 32% aged 18-24 agree that they 'should be allowed to apply for permanent settlement.' While this figure is low, the proportion is high compared to other age groups (in the range of 18%-21% for those aged above 35 years).

"[I] went to school with Sudanese, with Chinese, with Indians, with a lot of Albanians, Serbians, Greeks, everybody. My class alone, there was not two people that were from the same country... That's how I've always grown up. I've never really thought twice about it."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

Table 6: 'Multiculturalism has been good for Australia'

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+	Total
Strongly Agree	46.8%	47.8%	42.3%	34.5%	35.2%	30.1%	26.9%	38.9%
Agree	43.5%	41.9%	43.8%	49.3%	47.3%	49.9%	45.7%	45.7%
Sub-total agree	90.2%	89.6%	86.1%	83.9%	82.5%	80.0%	72.6%	84.6%

Source: Scanlon Foundation surveys, 2013-2016



Immigration, asylum seekers and cultural diversity

Attitudes towards Muslims

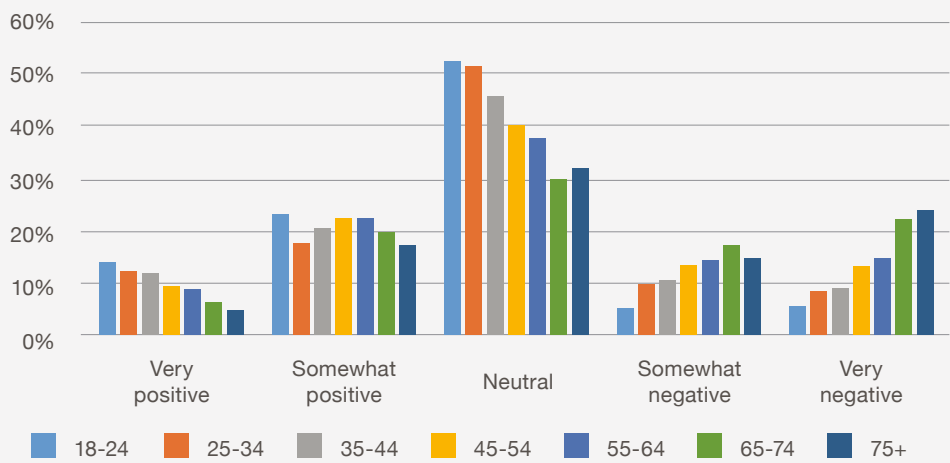
Low positive responses are also found in response to a question on attitudes to Muslim Australians, although the largest positive response ('very positive' and 'positive') is among those aged 18-24 (37%). This compares to 30%-32% in the age range of 25-64; 27% aged 65-74; and 22% aged 75 or above (Figure 2).

Today's young adults are more accepting of cultural diversity than the generation of their parents and grandparents. Do you think that the attitudes of young people will remain positive as they get older? What potential factors may negatively influence their attitudes?

The Scanlon Foundation surveys indicate high level of support among young adults for multiculturalism and immigration, but not asylum seekers. Do you view this finding to be accurate? What factors might explain this finding?




Figure 2: ‘Is your attitude positive, negative or neutral towards Muslims?’



Source: Scanlon Foundation surveys, 2010-2016

Experience of discrimination



Interestingly, while young adult respondents are most open to cultural diversity, they also report the highest levels of discrimination on the basis of 'skin colour, ethnic origin or religion.'

Across the Scanlon Foundation's nine national surveys, experience of discrimination ranges from a high 21% among those aged 18-24; to 19% aged 25-34; then drops to a lower 10% aged 55-64, and just 6% aged 65-74 (Figure 3).

This pattern can be explained, at least in part, by extent of interaction – younger respondents are most likely to mix with people in a range of different environments, while older age groups are more likely to have limited interaction beyond their circle of immediate friends and acquaintances.

Analysis by ethnicity of respondents among those aged 18-34 also finds marked differentiation in responses. Experience of discrimination is at 15% among third generation Australians (those born in Australia with both parents born in Australia), and a similar 14% for those born overseas of English speaking background, but jumps to 30% for those born overseas of non-English speaking background.

Qualitative data collected in Australia@2015 focus group sessions provides a deeper insight into the types and levels of discrimination faced by Australia's young people.

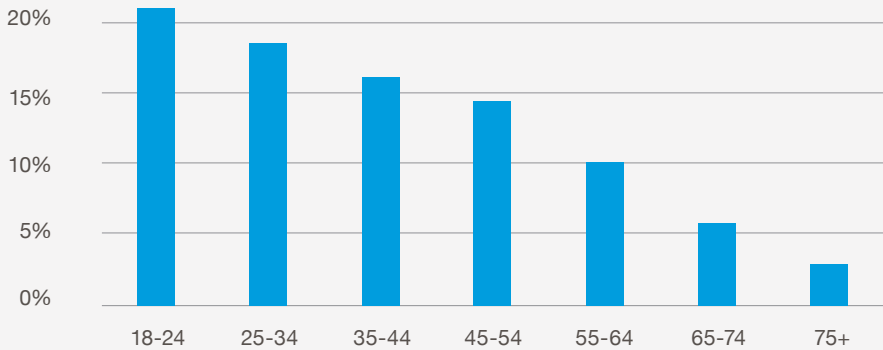
For example, young people who are members of minorities identified by appearance – whether physical, cultural, or both – reported experiencing prejudice when moving across the ethnic boundaries of cities.

They described suburbs where they feel at ease and 'normal,' and other localities or public places – such as shopping malls or on public transport – where they are conscious of being stare objects, outsiders, or alien.

"It's very multicultural. I feel like I fit in here, because it's so multicultural."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

Figure 3: 'Have you experienced discrimination because of your skin colour, ethnic origin or religion over the previous twelve months?'



Source: Scanlon Foundation surveys, 2007-2016

"If you go like north Sydney and stuff, there's all rich, white old men who'll just be like, 'Oh.....,' they're going to look at you weird and stuff, especially if you go to the shopping centre, they're going to look at you weird. ... You don't belong ... They're frightened by the idea of us."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

Complexities of discrimination

It is also important to consider that, while experiences of discrimination may refer to Australian-born persons discriminating against immigrants and members of minority groups, discrimination may also include intolerance present within immigrant communities; or conflict between members of different ethnic and religious groups.

In focus groups several non-Muslim women in areas of large Muslim populations discussed offensive behaviour that had been directed towards them by Muslim men. There were also comments by Muslim women who were offended by the attempts of other Muslims to enforce a code of behaviour which they saw as an attack on their personal freedom.

"Sometimes Australians can be racist towards other cultures, but then you've got those cultures that are coming here that are racist towards us. "

Australia@2015 focus group participant

"In this area, you've got a lot of groups... If you're not Lebanese or you're not Turkish they look at you like you're low or you're different ... You walk through them, like some Greek guy, they're like, 'Alright, get out of here' ... [They think] this is their country, and it's, 'So what are you doing here?'"

Australia@2015 focus group participant

"I saw an old woman, I'd say Italian or Greek... yelling at a girl in a headscarf yesterday who looked young and trendy and she was just walking down the street. I saw her take her headphones out of her ears because she thought the lady was going to talk to her, and then the woman was quite visibly angered and screaming at this girl."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

For many young females, discrimination on the basis of race, skin colour, or religion was not the main form of discrimination that they faced.

"Sexism [is]... more of a problem for a female ... ahead of racism, regardless of what cultural background or heritage you have ... You have less access to services, you face more barriers in terms of getting an education and getting a job, you find it harder to establish a strong social network, and things like that ... Men just have a ... cultural and structural advantage ... wherever they go ... They're men and society tends to give them particular privileges. "

Australia@2015 focus group participant

Available data suggests that conflict and discrimination feature in the lives of many, but not all, young people. Some young people indicate that they had not experienced discrimination, or if they had, it was a rare event. At the other extreme, some focus group respondents spoke of a constant tension in public places.

"We still face racism on a daily basis ... Every day."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

"My experience was very good; that's why I'm still here in Melbourne ... I've never faced racism in Australia. I feel very safe here. I've been [here] six months."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

Similarly, the impact of discrimination seems to vary greatly among individuals. Some dismiss what they see as minor incidents, while for others, a single confrontation can leave a legacy of unease and irritation for years ahead and dominate their view of Australia.

"One person cannot represent the whole country. If I meet a thousand people a day [and] 999 are very good to me, and one person says, 'hey bloody hell something...' I can't judge this country by one person."

Australia@2015 focus group participant

How significant a problem is discrimination between and within ethnic and cultural groups, relative to the discrimination faced by those of culturally diverse backgrounds within the mainstream?

Do you agree with the proposition that for many women, sexism is more of a problem than racism?

Conclusion

Australia remains a stable and highly cohesive society by international standards and this is in large part reflected in the attitudes of young people.

While recent global events suggest there have been major shifts in attitudes among youth overseas, in Australia, Scanlon Foundation data points more to consistency than to any marked change.

Despite being more likely to experience discrimination, young adults remain largely positive in their identification with Australia, and in their attitudes towards cultural diversity and social justice, recognising that benefits and opportunities outweigh the challenges. In many cases, their views and values in these areas offer a distinct contrast when compared with older members of Australian society.




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