Promoting confidence, active civics and citizenship, and raising the higher education participation aspirations of young people from backgrounds of disadvantage.

Dr Judith Wilks, School of Education

In collaboration with Mr Peter Heffernan, Orara High School, Coffs Harbour City Council and locally based design professionals in the areas of architecture, planning, engineering and ecology.

Summary

The impact of planning decisions affects the environment within which various communities live, work, study and play. Young people participate in a range of community spaces yet their needs and desires are often overlooked when planning decisions are made.

The Coffs Harbour Young Ambassadors for Design, a new and innovative program, emerged as a result of Dr Wilks’ research interests in promoting young people’s active citizenship in Australian secondary schools curriculum and youth participation at a local government level in relation to the design of the built environment.

The Young Ambassadors project gives young people in Coffs Harbour a voice in planning and design process and represents a significant collaboration between Southern Cross University’s School of Education, Orara High School and Coffs Harbour City Council. Young Ambassadors are developing aspirations to transition into higher education, and to work in the design, environmental and engineering professions through spending time with local design professionals and finding out about what they do.

Background

The Young Ambassadors project emerged from a NSW Premier’s Environmental Education Teachers Scholarship awarded to Judith Wilks in 2008 to research different youth participation projects at the local government level, in Europe and the UK. The research identified that social capital in the form of civic participation was generally lacking for young people and government agencies needed to start viewing children and young people as ‘stakeholders’ in government policy as opposed to ‘successful or unsuccessful outcomes’.

The main objective of the Young Ambassadors project is the active engagement of young people in their local community, and the promotion of higher education participation among a group of local students from backgrounds of disadvantage. By bringing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into contact with design professionals, the Young Ambassadors project enabled participants to develop a range of creative design appreciation skills while at the same time enhancing their aspiration to attend university.

The Young Ambassadors project took place in the context of research which showed that Years 8 – 11 are the years during which young people tend to develop their aspiration to study at university. Research has also shown that participation in higher education within regional Australia, including within the Mid North Coast, remains lower than the national average. The project began as a community engagement activity to build higher education aspirations from which community-based research outcomes emerged.

Learning

The Young Ambassadors project is an example of how semi-formal programs jointly conducted by local councils and public schools can support young people’s participation at a local level.
and build aspiration onto higher education opportunities;

The sharing of knowledge and skills between planning and design professional and young people, can lead to more meaningful and influential contributions from them in planning and urban design processes and potentially improving their wellbeing.

Civics and citizenship education within schools can be complemented by the provision of active, creative, authentic and meaningful programs by agencies at the local level to give them the opportunity to develop the citizenship skills they ‘learn about’ at school.

**Outcomes**

- A response to a strongly articulated desire expressed by the young people who participated in Coffs Harbour City Council’s Vision 2030 consultation processes in 2009 for ongoing and meaningful consultation has been developed;

- The creation of a communication space for the voices of young people in the decision making practices of Coffs Harbour City Council through local community and government consultations around the city’s development that has included; skate park development, community forums and input into the development of a new pilot youth communications strategy around the NBN roll-out.

- Published article of Dr Wilks research in ERA ranked ‘A’ journal, “Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design” based on the conference paper on the Young Ambassadors experience;

- The development of a three–way partnership model between local government, high schools and a regional university;

- The exposure of young people to decision making processes around the built environment, to learn about how it is created, and to develop the creative design appreciation skills to evaluate, and comment on development proposals;

- 100% of the Year 11 students who took part in this project in 2010 applied for university entry in 2012.

**Impact**

For the **Academic**, further research for Dr Wilks has emerged and is currently seeking ethics approval for and the development of a three –way partnership model between local government, high schools and a regional university

For the **Community**, young people at Orana High have reconsidered their future careers and education options as a result of participating in the project and experienced increased self-confidence and the continued development of the program in 2012 exploring other high schools participation and developing links with the UK My City Too model

For **Government**, the local council actively seek young people’s views on a range of matters to do with Coffs Harbour youth.

**Awards Category**

**Leadership**

**Good practice principles:**

Community-identified need, respect, mutual benefit, community-based research, and empowerment

**Recognition**

Judith Wilks received of the inaugural Excellence in Community Engagement Awards for Leadership in 2011 for this project.