

Evaluating Youth Engagement in Research: Challenges and lessons learned

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Background/Purpose:

The importance of engaging young people in matters affecting them is increasingly recognised, with numerous frameworks developed to guide meaningful youth engagement across diverse contexts. However, while the need to evaluate youth engagement is acknowledged, frameworks specifically designed to guide such evaluations, especially those with practical available and/or published examples, remain limited. This work sought to understand existing youth engagement evaluation approaches and identify what would be most appropriate to inform a retrospective evaluation within an Australian Centre of Research Excellence (CRE) focused on secondary data research, where a team of Youth Advocates aged 18–25 years were engaged as research partners rather than participants.

Approach:

A targeted review of academic and grey literature was conducted to identify how youth engagement initiatives have been evaluated and what tools or frameworks exist to guide such evaluations. The contexts, purposes, principles, methods, indicators, and tools were examined for their appropriateness and relevance to our setting and needs.

Outcomes/Impact:

Approaches to evaluating youth engagement varied widely, from unguided evaluations to adaptations of youth engagement frameworks and general program evaluation methods. While the literature presents comprehensive frameworks, challenges persist in applying them in practice. In our context, key issues included the lack of a single framework aligned with our purpose, limited availability of practical examples for conducting evaluations, the resource-intensive nature of some tools, and the difficulty of synthesising multiple frameworks to identify relevant elements. Balancing methodological rigour with practical feasibility was a recurring challenge, and ultimately, a pragmatic approach that enabled evaluation using available resources was prioritised over an ideal.

Innovation and Significance:

This work shares practice-based insights and highlights the gap between theory and implementation in evaluating youth engagement. There is a need for greater sharing of evaluation experiences and continued advocacy for evaluation to be routinely embedded and adequately resourced.