

Whitlam Institute

WITHIN WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

WHAT MATTERS TO YOUNG AUSTRALIANS THROUGH TURBULENT TIMES?

INSIGHTS FROM THE
2019-2023 *WHAT MATTERS?*
WRITING COMPETITION



Professor Philippa Collin, Dr Sky Hugman,
Dr Michael Hartup and Mr Ammar Randhawa

February 2025





About the Whitlam Institute

The Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University is a dynamic research and policy think tank, and a prime ministerial public museum. It commemorates and draws inspiration from the life and work of the Honourable Gough Whitlam AC QC and celebrates the contemporary relevance of his ideas. It pursues the causes he championed and is guided by the principles upon which Gough Whitlam's parliamentary career and years of service to the people of Australia were founded.

For more information about the Whitlam Institute, please visit our website whitlam.org.

About *What Matters?*

The *What Matters? Writing Competition* has been running since 2004 and has generated a rich archive of the views of young Australians. As a competition it is unparalleled in Australia, producing over 25 million words by young people on what matters to them. The competition began in NSW and expanded sequentially to the ACT, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and the NT. Now any young person who is enrolled in a year category in an Australian school is eligible to enter the competition of their own volition. Students can submit essays independently and many entries are created within a classroom setting. Teachers commonly use the competition as a writing exercise to help students plan, draft, use persuasive arguments and publish their writing. To enter the Whitlam Institute's *What Matters? Writing Competition*, students from years five to twelve submit an original written work up to 600 words in prose or poetry, of either fiction or non-fiction, that responds to the question: 'What Matters?'. This Report extends the previous Whitlam Institute analysis of the 2010-2018 *What Matters? Writing Competition* (Collin, P., and Hugman, S. (2020). *What Matters to Young Australians? Exploring young people's perspectives 2010-2018*. Whitlam Institute, Sydney).

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Foreword

Professor Azadeh Dastyari, Director, Research and Policy

There is no uniform experience of being young. My eight-year-old daughter often tells me it's not easy being a kid. She's navigating the challenges of the online world while grappling with the overwhelming realities of a planet in crisis. At her age, I was adjusting to a new country and learning to navigate an unfamiliar culture and language. Our experiences are vastly different, but what connects my life then with hers now is the limited opportunities for young people to be truly heard—a shared feeling of exclusion from the bigger decisions that shape our lives and those around us. Young people are often spoken about rather than spoken to. We may celebrate youth, praising young people as symbols of hope, yet we frequently overlook their voices or elevate some while ignoring others. This disconnect between our admiration for youth and our failure to genuinely engage with their needs and desires creates a dangerous blind spot, leaving young people feeling undervalued and unheard in shaping the future they are expected to inherit. I felt that way when I was her age, and I know she feels it now.

Since 2004, the Whitlam Institute's *What Matters? Writing Competition* has given over 50,000 young Australians, like my daughter, a unique platform to express their thoughts, concerns, and hopes. It is important that we listen. Research can play a vital role in amplifying these voices, turning individual stories into collective narratives that carry weight and credibility, especially for those who might otherwise be overlooked or marginalised. The Whitlam Institute commissioned this report to gain deeper insights into the perspectives of young Australians during the pivotal years of 2019 to 2023—a period marked by a global pandemic, catastrophic bushfires, and a surge in activism around climate change, social justice, and democracy.

The findings reveal that young Australians are engaged participants in shaping our collective future. They speak with passion and urgency on issues such as the environment, mental health, social justice, and democracy, challenging the status quo and demanding greater accountability from those in power.

My deepest thanks go to the students who participated in the *What Matters? Writing Competition*, the educators and families who supported them, and the researchers and authors of this report. The insights, concerns, and aspirations captured here provide a valuable blueprint for the society we can and should build. This report is more than a reflection of what matters to young Australians—it is a call to action. It urges educators, policymakers, and community leaders to engage more deeply with the perspectives of young people in our country.

Gough Whitlam, whose vision and commitment to equality remain a guiding light for our work, once said that the real answer to solving the modern malaise facing society 'is to involve the creative energies of our children and our youth.' May this report inspire us all to listen more closely to young people and to work together to create a future that reflects their dreams and takes seriously their ideas—a future where the world is more just, fair and equitable and being a kid is a little easier.





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NATIONAL WRITING COMPETITION 2023

Whitlam Institute
WITHIN WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY

OVERALL WINNER 2023
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About The Authors



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Dr Sky Hugman is a social scientist interested in how knowledge is produced. Her most recent projects focus on arts-based knowledge translation with a focus on artists collectives and ‘collective reflexivity’ to examine the role collective responses play when addressing contemporary challenges. These projects emphasise the role of reflexivity, resistance, and the imaginary in the generation of alternative knowledge production spaces. Other interests include network representation and theory, and the use of natural language mapping software for text analytics and network analysis. Sky is a member of the WSU Young and Resilient Research Centre.



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Dr Michael Everitt Hartup is a researcher, educator, and audio-maker based in Melbourne, Australia. Michael’s research focusses on young people’s experiences of mental illness, participation in creative practice, popular culture studies, experience of climate related disasters, and vulnerability and resilience studies. This work has been conducted across both the not-for-profit and tertiary sector.



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Executive Summary

We are living in challenging times. Since 2019 the world has seen a global pandemic, escalating climate change, dramatic advances in digital technologies including Generative Artificial Intelligence as well as persistent and new geopolitical conflicts and rising costs of living. Democracies everywhere are grappling with how to respond to these challenges, and to work towards a good society.

Children and young people face the immediate and long-term consequences of decisions made today. Understanding their perspectives on what really matters in society and what actions, people and institutions we need to govern and live well into the future can be a valuable source of renewal for community and democracy.

Since 2004 the Whitlam Institute has run a writing competition for Australian students posing the question, 'What Matters?' to them. Over the years, more than 50,000 entries have been received, with 22,531 between 2019 and 2024. Building on analysis of entries received between 2010–2018 (Collin and Hugman, 2020) and new interviews with 14 competition finalists, this report shares what students have written about in the last five years. The report also charts the continuities and changes in what Australian students are concerned about, how they conceptualise different issues, actors and actions, and what they consider makes for a good society.

The aim was to uncover what writing by Australian students tells us about youthful politics and the implications—and opportunities—these insights hold for Australian community and democracy. Our analysis finds:

A new socio-political imaginary is emerging among young people. Young people write about many things in diverse ways. There are also clear commonalities, concepts and sentiments across the corpus that tell us about what young people think makes for a good life and a good society. Often they are writing about what makes this moment in time exceptional—in relation to climate change, war and violence, technological change—and what actions need to be taken by individuals, communities, and institutions for them to have a future. Young people are exploring imagined futures and their place within these—sometimes with hope and frequently with anxiety and fear. This is a distinct shift between the essays of 2010–2018 and those submitted between 2019–2023.

Over time, important continuities emerge in the topics and themes that students write about as they grow older. Across all years and year groups family is the most prominent topic. As in past years, younger entrants write from their personal experience—often about the relationships and events that directly affect them. Older students also write about their relationships to others, but often in more abstract terms and connected to contemporary events, debates and broader social issues. Over the five years, from 2019 to 2023, we can see younger students writing earlier about macro and complex issues such as climate change, social justice, and human and women's rights.

Young people have a relational view of the world, meaning they see the connections and dependencies between people, non-human things and 'the way things are.' Along with Family, over the five years students consistently write about People, Life and



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Time. In older age groups and over the years, the topics of Change, Climate and Women become more prominent. Entrants consider how and why issues emerge through the relationships between things, and why these relations matter for the nature of society.

Since 2019, young people are writing more about specific topics such as Family, Environment, Mental Health and Social Media. They are exploring the opportunities and challenges associated with key issues, and articulating responses to address problems. Young people have a strong sense of personal responsibility to create change.

The sentiments expressed are more pronounced than in previous years. Across the corpus the dominant sentiments are of hope and care, fear and anxiety. While focused on problems and solutions, entrants are writing with a great deal of emotion and affect. Their writing suggests that they are made to feel responsible for problems they did not create and tend to focus on individual solutions to these issues, unlike the collective approaches more commonly put forward in the first decade of the competition.

Young people know Democracy and Government matter. Students are exploring the concept of democracy and different forms of governing systems, especially in the later years of school. But they are underwhelmed by the way Australian democracy is currently working. Specifically, they highlight the important role that governments play and that they should do more to address the big challenges of our time—for all people, generations and non-living things. The analysis demonstrates that expectations of democracy are changing and that established political elites from the media to the houses of Parliament are on notice.

The entries also indicate that over time young people are growing more concerned about shared experiences, justice and the existential crisis that climate change poses. They want to see action, and they want to be part of the change. The calls for intergenerational—and intersectional—collaboration and justice that were evident in the analysis of *What Matters?* writing from 2010–2018 are more pronounced in the 2019–2023 corpus.

At the same time, the views expressed in these entries are not representative of all young people, aged 10–18, in Australia. We also need to ask what is important to young people who do not enter this competition and how they see the world. These young people also live in communities and online, and are exposed to opportunities and challenges and dominant ideas about who they are, who they should be and what value they have in society. It is important to consider and seek out their views—a challenge even for an inclusive and engaging competition such as the *What Matters? Writing Competition*.

This is not least because young people in many different spaces are calling for greater concern, care and action on the big issues of our time—in our own back yards, and on the global stage. The entries to the *What Matters? Writing Competition* have increased in number and the enthusiasm and critical thought with which students write should give us all pause for thought and inspiration for working together to make our communities, Australia and the world, a better, safer, more secure place for all.



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Recommendations

In the spirit of revitalising democracy through genuine engagement with young people we make the following recommendations:

- 1.** That political parties, politicians, governments, policy makers and educators recognise the civic and political rights of young people in ways that expand democracy.
- 2.** Adopt an intergenerational approach to governance and policy making.
- 3.** Revamp civics education.
- 4.** Encourage decisive action on climate change and environmental stewardship.
- 5.** Support initiatives that promote social cohesion and conflict resolution.
- 6.** Address inequality and discrimination.
- 7.** Support mental health and tackle *the causes* of the causes of distress.
- 8.** Address the potential harms and help maximise the benefits of digital technologies and the media.
- 9.** Strengthen and support national and global youth networks including youth participation in peacebuilding.
- 10.** Focus strategies for building back trust in institutions.



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Introduction

Ours is a time of significant change—both exciting and confronting. Technological, social and cultural advances are matched in scale by the deepening of inequalities and social tensions. Globally we all face the consequences of climate change and the urgent need to prevent further harm and to recover and repair our planet.

Children and young people¹ have a significant stake in the nature and implications of these changes. Yet their views are rarely sought and, when they do speak publicly, they are often not understood or taken seriously. Despite their knowledge and capacities, young people are not afforded real agency or power in community and government decision making until they are 18 years old. This is reflected in Australian law and policy, as well as in the cultures and norms that construct young people as deficient and less valued than older community members.

At the same time, young people in Australia care about a wide range of issues and are active in myriad ways, from everyday practices such as caring for loved ones and recycling to leading or taking part in organisations and campaigns calling for change on issues they care about, such as climate change and war.

In 1973 the Whitlam Government lowered the voting age to 18, in recognition of the need to better align the rights of young people impacted by government legislation with formal processes of democracy. While the debate about further lowering the voting age continues, there

is little doubt that the ongoing health of our democracy will depend significantly on how we consider, respect and nurture the civic and political knowledge and agency of young people now and into the future.

In 2020, analysis of 27,814 *What Matters?* entries from 2010 to 2018, and interviews with finalists, found that students write about a wide range of local, national and global topics. They were concerned about the rights and wellbeing of people, animals and environments, and how to achieve a more caring and just world. There was strong evidence that young people recognised the role of different actors and institutions in society and value participatory and collaborative efforts to address challenges that we face as a society.

Five years on, the current project is to further understand what young people say when they ‘speak’ from their own contexts and communities—and how this may have changed over time. By analysing *What Matters?* entries and interviewing competition finalists, we have looked for students who conceptualise ‘what matters’ in society and then identify who should respond and what actions should follow. In considering what young people say about the substance, agents, institutions, norms and values of political life we can better understand the socio-political imaginary of this generation—and the implications this has for contemporary democracy.

¹ Drawing on United Nations definitions and considering that the *What Matters? Writing Competition* focuses on school students, we refer throughout this report to ‘young people.’ By this we mean those young people who, since 2019 were enrolled in Australian schools and are therefore likely to now be aged 10 to 23 years. We note that increasingly ‘young people’ refers to a wider age range of 10 to 25.



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Background

Young people are living in a time of great complexity and uncertainty. They are being shaped by, and are influencing, social, economic, technological and ecological change. At the same time, young people occupy a unique space in Australian society and democracy. They are not afforded the same rights, responsibilities or recognition as ‘adults’—despite being members of communities, students, workers, participants and leaders of organisations and campaigns, and creators of initiatives and enterprises. Young people today also face the immediate and long-term consequence of deepening economic, environmental and social inequalities (Think Forward, 2023).

As members of society, children and young people have civic and political rights: to take part and have a say in their present and future. Indeed, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts their rights to have a say (Article 12) and to association (Article 15) in recognition that these rights for young people are rarely considered in civic and political life.

Since 2019 much has changed in the world. A global pandemic, the widespread application of Generative Artificial Intelligence, escalating climate change and persistent and new conflicts and insecurity are just a few of the major shifts and changes that have affected people right around the world. Many young people in Australia have directly experienced catastrophic climate events, have campaigned for an end to gender-based and domestic violence, and at local, national, regional and global levels have engaged in everyday and formal efforts to promote social justice and to care for people, places and non-human things.

“Young people are living in a time of great complexity and uncertainty. They are being shaped by, and are influencing, social, economic, technological and ecological change. At the same time, young people occupy a unique space in Australian society and democracy.”

“... rather than having a narrow focus on ‘single issues’ many young people express awareness of the way different things such as gender, class, agism and colonialism underpin complex problems such as violence, racism and climate change.”

Young people are also more connected than ever through digital and mobile media: to their peers, families, communities, interests and information. Digital technologies are embedded in how young people learn, play, connect with others, express themselves and act on the issues that matter to them (Third et al., 2019). As online apps and content proliferate, young people have greater exposure to information (of varying quality and veracity) on events, causes, and effects of complex and intersecting issues. These dynamics have shaped ways of learning about and engaging with civic and political issues, with implications for political identities and practices and Australian democracy. In particular:

Young people matter. It is increasingly recognised that conceptualising children and young people as ‘apprentice citizens’ is a violation of their rights, misrecognises how they learn about and see themselves in the world, and erodes trust in democracy (Collin, 2015; Chowdhury, 2021). Shifts and trends provide context for rethinking young people’s role in democracy. How they write about ‘what matters,’ what they think should be done to address their concerns and who they believe should act, provides us with important insights on what Australian democracy needs to be for this generation.

Enactment of young people’s rights to participation in community and government decision making is increasing—in some ways but not in others. The 2010s and 2020s have seen more commitment to the role of young people in democracy and institutional commitments to youth engagement. For example, in 2015 the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS), formalising an agenda for positive youth participation in peace and security (Berents, 2022). In Australia, local and state governments have variously embraced forms of youth participation, instituting or legislating youth consultation and engagement mechanisms, such as Commissioners and Advocates for Children and Young People (Collin, 2015). At the Federal level, the Albanese Labor Government has (re)instituted an Office for Youth, national Youth Advisory Boards across a range of policy areas, and a Youth Engagement Strategy to support the public service to work with young people in policy making (Office for Youth, 2023). Formally, young people’s engagement is managed but their leadership, for example in social movements, is sometimes dismissed or derided. Moreover, concerns about the health of democracy still frequently blame young people for being ill-informed and unengaged in politics (Watts et al., 2024).

Young people are concerned with issues and see the relationships between different challenges. Like many others, young people become interested, mobilise and develop a sense of social and political awareness through issues such as mental health, climate change, gender and sexuality, war and justice (Collin, 2015; Feldman, 2020; Han

and Ahn, 2020; Hee et al., 2022; Hilder and Collin, 2022; Arnot et al., 2023; Russell, 2024). However, rather than having a narrow focus on ‘single issues’ young people express awareness of the way different things such as gender, class, agism and colonialism underpin complex problems such as violence, racism and climate change (Collin et al., 2023). Social and political issues help young people connect their lived experience, feelings and ideas to wider processes and institutions; such issues also provide them with accessible opportunities to connect with other young people and to take action across online and offline spaces (Campbell, 2018; Moran and Gatwiri, 2022; Dreher et al., 2016). As evidenced by the recent School Strike 4 Climate, March 4 Justice and Strike 4 Palestine movements (to name just a few), young people in Australia are both leading and participating in campaigns in significant numbers and important ways (Collin and Matthews, 2021; Bessant and Lohmeyer, 2021; Bessant, 2020b).

Like older cohorts, young people’s trust and engagement in traditional social and political institutions is tenuous. Young people’s commitment to action is often fuelled by a lack of ‘confidence’ (Russell, 2024, p. 74) and low ‘trust’ (Stephenson et al., 2024, p. 17) in governments and their ‘perceptions of the willingness of governments to act’ (Arnot et al., 2023, p. 5). While civic and political education is sorely lacking, the type and depth of citizenship learning also matters (Manning and Edwards, 2013; Bessant et al., 2016; Ghazarian, et al., 2020). Higher levels of civic knowledge may even correspond with being less likely to engage in more formalised electoral participation, as young people can be ‘less convinced of the value and impact of electoral or institutionalised political participation’ (Reichert and Print, 2017, p. 1177). In contrast with previous assumptions, young people are not more disengaged from Australian democracy than previous generations. Instead, they are committed to democratic principles and processes, just as major social, economic or political events shape their views on the health of democracy (Chowdhury, 2022).

Views and modes of participation in social and political life are raced and gendered. How young people are ‘constructed’ as good citizens, how processes and institutions of democracy operate in civic and political life, as well as the way young people perceive political organisations and actors, matters (Collin et al., 2019). For example, processes of racialisation (how groups are represented as different) inform how young people and others understand the possibilities of citizenship and what young people should know and do (Harris, 2024). Perceptions of relevance and the attractiveness of traditional institutions help explain why youth membership of political parties and unions remains lower than older generations. Fewer women than men are likely to join a political party or to report that they envisage running for public office (Ammassari et al., 2022). Having strong social

connections to political parties, as well as acceptance of an adversarial and masculine political culture, further inform whether or not young people, especially young women, join traditional social and political organisations (Ammassari et al., 2022). Young people's participation in and leadership of social movement organisations and advocacy is also gendered (Bessant et al., 2023). Similarly, the language young people use to frame major issues of concern shows that they understand the relationship between various forms of social, political and economic injustice, race and gender (Catanzaro, 2024).

The economic and social standing of young people is precarious. Young people were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic; they faced job losses, interrupted education, limited social connections and curtailed opportunities to take part in everyday forms of leisure and play (OECD, 2020; Schady et al., 2023). Despite their unique social and economic disadvantage, it was not until late in the pandemic that policy makers considered the perspectives of children and young people and created public-health regulations that took into consideration their views and needs. Young people are also increasingly aware and angry about structural inequality baked into our system, including in areas such as employment, housing and taxation (Think Forward, 2023). Like the early 1970s when people under the age of 21 could be conscripted to war, but not vote on the government that created such laws, young people are experiencing the immediate and long-term effects of decisions they have little power to influence.

Youthful politics are responsive to these contradictions and injustices. In general, young women are more progressive than young men, while Australian 'Millennial and Gen Z' young men are more progressive than men of older generations (Chowdhury, 2024). In addition to supporting progressive causes, young people in Australia are now leading a campaign to lower the voting age to sixteen (www.makeit16.au). While some parties and politicians support lowering the voting age, thus far efforts in several jurisdictions to expand the franchise have not succeed. At the same time, some young people are engaged with conservative, far right, populist and extremist social and political perspectives and groups (Nilan and Gentles, 2024). In the context of mobile and hyper-media cultures, connecting with and having extreme views reinforced is becoming easier and more powerful (Nilan and Gentles, 2024). This trend is one that researchers, policy makers, educators, carers and young people themselves must better understand and respond to.

In this context, hearing from young people and considering their perspectives on what matters is more vital than ever. Understanding what they define as important, what values and norms of action they want to see, and their views on institutions and social arrangements that can support a good society can prompt new thinking on how to evolve and strengthen democracy. Such an approach aims to identify links between young people's emergent and everyday ways of seeing and acting on the world, and the forms of democratic governance and institutions we need to address what matters to us all.



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Methodology

In 2018 we developed a mixed methods approach to analyse 27,184 *What Matters?* entries that were received by the Whitlam Institute between 2010 and 2018 (Collin and Hugman, 2020). We have used the same methodology to analyse a further 22,531 *What Matters?* entries received from 2019 to 2024 and 14 new in-depth interviews with competition finalists between April and May 2024.

In this section we describe the data and the approach to analysis. For more detail, in each sub-section of the Findings we explain the methods used to ascertain the following: the main themes young people wrote about between 2019 and 2023 by year level and year of competition; the issues and topics identified to be of concern to them; the reasons young people wrote about their chosen topics; and the change they looked for and who they thought should bring this change about. Our analysis considers how themes and topics change over time and what can explain these changes.

Data sets

This report is based on two datasets. The first included 22,531 typed essays submitted online to the competition between 2019 and 2023. This formed the ‘corpus’ that we analysed overall to derive topics and key concepts. We then took a close look at a subset of 12,589 essays across the five years to understand what young people mean when they write about particular topics. The second data set consisted of 14 in-depth interviews with competition finalists between 2020 and 2024. Demographic information extracted from the digitised entries included gender, postcode and whether a student attended a public or private school and if they attend a single sex or coeducational school. The essay title, how the entry was submitted, geographic location of school and whether the submission is a fictional, true or personal story, were also specified.

Entrants

Essays were submitted online and were contributed by a total of 22,531 students enrolled in Australian schools from years 5–6 to 11–12 (Table 1).

Table 1: Breakdown of essay entrants by calendar year and school year level

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Year 5-6	1583	1390	2482	1662	2360	9477
Year 7-8	1037	1367	1525	864	1105	5898
Year 9-10	1096	1011	1098	962	929	5096
Year 11-12	434	423	433	324	446	2060
Total	4150	4191	5538	3812	4840	22531

Gender

Data analysis showed a similar distribution across gender variants (Table 2) as the previous *What Matters?* report. Between 2019 and 2023 most entrants identify as female (63%) while those who identify as male make up 35% of the distribution. There are small percentages of students who select other or prefer not to answer. From 2022 onwards we see a slight decrease in entrants who identify as non-binary. In the 2019–2023 data set there is a small decrease in the percentage of female entrants, 2% lower than entries analysed in the 2010–2018 report.

Table 2: Breakdown of essay entrants by calendar year and gender

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Females	2628	2606	3396	2397	3134	14161
Males	1462	1539	1979	1318	1616	7914
Other/prefer not to answer	60	46	163	61	61	391
Non-Binary	0	0	0	36	29	65
Total	4150	4191	5538	3812	4840	22531

Interview Participants

Between March and May 2024, 14 competition finalists took part in online semi-structured interviews. All competition finalists from 2020–2024 were invited to take part. In total, ten students identifying as female and four who identified as male participated. They were aged from 12 to 20 years at the time of interview and were from NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. Table B summarises the interviewee demographics.

Table 3: Summary of competition finalists who were interviewed

Age at interview	12 – 14 = 3 15 – 17 = 7 18 – 20 = 4	Country of birth	Australia = 13 England = 1
Year of Entry	2020 = 2 2021 = 3 2022 = 2 2023 = 7	Parent’s country of birth	Australia = 8 England = 2 Slovakia = 1 Bangladesh = 1 USA = 1 India = 1 Russia = 1 Ireland = 1
School year	Yr 5/6 = 2 Yr 7/8 = 5 Yr 9/10 = 4 Yr 11/12 = 3	School location	NSW metro = 9 NSW regional = 2 VIC metro = 2 TAS metro = 1
Gender	F = 10 M = 4		

The interviews were conducted online using zoom and ranged between 30 and 60 minutes.

The finalists interviewed wrote about a range of topics and to preserve their anonymity we do not disclose what these are. Topics included education, human, Indigenous and gender rights, equality and representation. In interviews, students were asked why they chose their particular topic, what actions should be taken to address their concerns, and who they think can bring about that change. They were asked to share their data sources and what people or things influenced their ideas and their understanding of the role of digital technologies and media. Finally, we asked them what is the role of young people in society, and what are the barriers that stop young people being able to create change? For the purposes of analysis and reporting interviewees were given pseudonyms.

“After identifying and analysing key themes we then selected four prominent themes—Australia, Government, Environment and Health—to help us to understand the meanings associated within different themes.”

Analysis

Competition entries were analysed using Leximancer, a natural language mapping (text mining) program, to identify significant semantic and discursive patterns within the corpus. Leximancer helped identify key themes and concepts across the collection within years and year-groups. As a visual tool Leximancer helped identify relations between themes and concepts and provided ways to visualise and analyse concepts that are built around co-occurring words (see Figures 1 & 2). Leximancer forms themes around concepts highlighting how concepts 'travel' together and produce discourses (Hodge and Matthews, 2011; Collin and Hugman, 2020). Using Leximancer we identified and analysed top themes, concept seeds and associated topics.

Analysis was also undertaken to determine the most frequent topics that *What Matters?* entrants write about. Students are asked to name their essay, and we determined the top 50 topics across all years, and across each year group. Entries were also analysed to find relationships between gender variables.

After identifying and analysing key themes we then selected four prominent themes—*Australia*, *Government*, *Environment* and *Health*—to help us to understand the meanings associated within different themes. We identified the topics, issues and actions young people discussed in relation to these themes to understand what young people mean when they write about particular topics.

As with the previous *What Matters?* research, thematic analysis helped identify broad themes but did not explain what authors meant when they used a term. For example, a text that uses the word health might be discussing mental health, physical health, or the health of the environment or a community. When discussing health young people may also be exploring actions they take to improve the overall health of society. Alternatively, a text on the concept of health could be discussing the ways entrants seek to improve the mental health of themselves or other young people. Entries might also be concerned with a variety of issues that affect the mental health of different genders. For example, some *What Matters?* essays explore the gendered determinants of health by considering the links between gender and intimate family violence. These are all different ideas that can mean different things to different people. A theme such as 'health,' therefore, is not a self-explanatory idea. Associated meanings, beliefs and values conveyed are formulated through discourse. Therefore, the second stage analysis focused on examining what young people wrote about within themes and with which concepts and discourses. This required in-depth analysis



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of the four themes: *Australia*, *Government*, *Environment*, and *Health*. To analyse these themes, we did keywords analysis on a subset of essays using Leximancer and a manual analysis on random samples was undertaken.

The interviews were transcribed using Zoom's in-built transcription service as well as via otter.ai. The researcher who conducted the interviews then checked the transcripts to ensure accuracy and that the specific nuances of the participants' responses were captured. Transcripts were then uploaded to the data analysis software, NVivo. Following this, a sample of interviews was read through to re-familiarise the researcher with the interview data and to develop some initial themes. A grounded analysis approach was then taken as a means of generating clearer themes across the 14 transcripts. These themes were then further clarified with the lead researcher and the final list of themes was developed.

This project was approved by the WSU Human Research Ethics Committee (H12951).



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Findings: What Matters?

Young people consistently write about the world around them and focus on relationships with friends, family, animals, the environment and other members of society. Essays indicate that students have a relational understanding of the world—seeing how the possibilities of life and society are the result of the relationship between things. Young people are concerned with social issues, as well as their immediate and the broader environment and the natural world. Consistent with previous analysis (Collin and Hugman, 2020) young people write about local and global issues and take an interest in the actions they or the broader community can take to make change.

Key themes young people write about over time

Leximancer was used to generate themes across different calendar years and class groups using 'Automatic Content Analysis' (ACA). The top themes are identified across all school year levels and competition years and compared over time.

Young people write about a very wide variety of issues within each year group, in each year of the competition and from one year to the next. However, there are some themes young people consistently write about. Across the corpus for 2019–2023 we see the recurrence of themes such as *People*, *Animals*, *Time* and *Family*, which often include the importance of relationships, connections in society, friends and the importance of caring for the environment, animals and those around them.

These themes occur across the five-year corpus in all age groups. The theme most young people have written about over all the years of the competition is *People*. This continues the trend we saw in the 2010–2018 data, which showed that young people are mainly writing about their immediate family and friendship groups as well as social groups other than their own. They discuss relationships and how they change over time, and the role loved ones play in their life. When writing about *People*, *What Matters?* entries consistently show concern for the values and rights that should underpin how we treat one another despite diverse cultures and national borders.

2019

In 2019 all school age groups wrote about the theme of *People* (Table 4) and explored a broad range of ideas. For example, entries talked about interpersonal relationships with family and friends, the importance of relationships and spending time with family and friends to make memories. The theme of *People* also reflected issues related to broader social relations including racism, homophobia, bullying and the gender pay gap.

When writing about *People* entrants also explored themes related to *Life, Health, the Future* and what they *Believe in*, or what they believe should happen for a positive future. For example, entries advocated for believing in women’s rights and the equal treatment of women, climate change and animal rights. Some essays reflected on immediate pressures, including school workloads, timetables, deadlines and job prospects. For example, students wrote about what they *Believe* should happen to reduce this pressure and articulated ways to reduce student workloads so they can enjoy *Life*.

Entrants reflected on their own status as a future generation and were aware of the role they play in future events, issues, and what the world will look like. When writing about the *Future* essays, showed a concern for how individual and government choices and decisions will affect the future. The future of the planet is a prominent concern in the corpus, and entrants also explored social possibilities of living in peace and harmony and what might be needed to achieve a more positive future.

Health emerged under themes of *Refugees* and *Change* as well as the under the theme of *People*. For example, entrants discussed the health of refugees and argued for more humane treatment, better medical facilities and better living conditions for those seeking asylum in Australia. Many entrants were concerned with providing refugees and asylum seekers with access to a quality of life that they themselves enjoy.

Table 4: Main Themes in 2019

YEAR	Year 5 – 6	Year 7 – 8	Year 9 – 10	Year 11 – 12
2019	People world, life, need, things, food, care, future, believe	People life, world, need, live, children, media, future, believe	People School, children, media, mental, health, believe, young	People world, life, live, person, future, others, everyone
	Day time, family, school, feel, home, friends, love, parents	Time day, feel, home, friends, school, parents	Life time, day, things, take, feel, better	Time day, school, family, home, parents
	Children money, everyone, women, education, better, different	Things family, someone, different, person, others	World need, change, lives, future, become	Need become, place, believe, better, women
	Animals water, stop, plastic, environment, pollution	Refugees Australia, detention, health, mental	Family friends, others, someone, different, parents	Change society, social, media, health, human
	Look try, everything, start, whole	Water food, stop, animals	Down home, face, felt	Down eyes, face, left

2020

In 2020 all year groups continued the trend of writing about *People* (Table 5) and the concept of *Care* became more prominent. For example, entrants wrote about the importance of caring (for mother nature, for women rights, for animal rights, and for other human beings). Many students connected the concept of *Change* with *Care*, especially when advocating for actions to address issues. *Care* was often related to family, but also related to the need to take care of the planet for future generations. *Time* was discussed in relation to the importance of spending time with family and friends, which was seen as strengthening positive behaviour and building self-esteem.

The theme of *Look* among year 5–6 students reflected their growing awareness of the world and seeing problems ‘everywhere they look.’ However, the theme also expressed hopeful sentiments as many students wrote about new beginnings and looking forward to better times. Some themes, such as *Down* reflected the creativity with which students wrote. For example, students spoke about tears or sweat streaming down their faces while telling personal stories, or rain pouring down while walking their streets in a year when there was significant flooding in many parts of Australia.

In a year that saw national calls for an end to violence against women and the emergence of the March for Justice movement (in 2021), it is perhaps unsurprising that the theme of *Women* is prominent. Students were concerned with the lack of safety for young women in public spaces, inequality in pay structures and lack of comparative educational attainment for girls. Most students who wrote about *Women* explored pertinent social questions, asking why women are not treated equally or reflecting on gender education disparity or the sexual exploitation of women. Entrants often tried to provide solutions to these issues, exploring what might make a good society for women. The themes of *Society* and *Better* reflected the actions and outcomes that entrants believed were needed to provide equal opportunities for women and young girls and for a prosperous society.

Table 5: Main Themes in 2020

YEAR	Year 5 – 6	Year 7 – 8	Year 9 – 10	Year 11 – 12
2020	People world, life, needs, things, care, future, believe	People world, life, things, Australia, everyone, future, care, believe	People life, world, things, change, others, believe, care, social	People world, life, things, live, future, someone, living
	Time family, day, feel, school, friends, love, parents, happy	Time day, home, work, everything, thought	Time day, feel, love, place, feeling, hope	Time day, home, family, take, friends, parents
	Animals food, water, change, stop, pollution, environment	Family feel, love, someone, children, person, times	School family, take, home, friends, parents	Feel love, everything, words, body, feeling
	Important children, better, work, everyone, others, health	Water people, animals, year, food, stop	Women children, society, young, future, girls, education	Need others, become, everyone, person
	Look doing, bad, start, everything	Change lives, living, humans, environment	Someone water, everything, food	Down face, look, night

2021

Again in 2021 the theme of *People* remained the strongest for all students (Table 6) and was associated with diverse topics related to *World, Change* and *Society*. When exploring these themes entrants discussed climate change and the need for collective effort. Many students wrote of concerns for life on Earth, diminishing resources of the planet, the death of flora and fauna, and important lifecycles that support human life.

Across the corpus, entries were both problem and solution focused. For example, many discussed the consequences of global warming and climate change, and then expanded on actions they want to see happen to address these issues. Many students wrote about individual action, for instance, reducing plastic usage, encouraging recycling and spreading environmental awareness. Competition entrants were writing about environmental issues at a younger age than in the previous decade: year 5–6 students wrote about issues such as rapid global warming, excessive burning of fossil fuels, destruction of the ozone layer, bushfires and deforestation.

Themes related to *Women* and *Life* featured in 2021. In these themes entries explored issues of child labour and the treatment of women, especially young women, which are seen as global issues. The mistreatment of young adults at work and in law enforcement in Australia were also concerns. When writing about *Work* entrants explored gender inequality and the pay gap. Some entrants argued that gender equality needs to be fully recognised as the first step to create a more just society. Older students wrote about the media perpetuating gender inequalities and unhealthy beauty standards. Entries also discussed the role of education of young boys around gender equity and masculinity and respectful relationships.

Table 6: Main Themes in 2021

YEAR	Year 5 – 6	Year 7 – 8	Year 9 – 10	Year 11 – 12
2021	People world, life, need, things, change, care, future	People world, life, things, need, change, health, care, future	Life time, day, school, things, family, friends, love, parents	People world, society, change, need, young, health, believe, future, culture
	Time day, family, feel, school, friends, happy, parents	Day time, school, family, home, long, parents	People world, need, change, live, health, society, social, believe	Life time, day, feel, school, home, love, different, everything
	Important everyone, different, better, children, health, women	Feel friends, everyone, different, love, someone, everything	Feel take, someone, better, everyone, different, become	Down look, long, body, fear, left
	Animals plastic, water, stop, pollution, environment	Food animals, year, water, humans, plastic	Children Australia, future, year, living, important, country, education	Women media, men, stop, power
	Down look, start	Others person, women, society, believe, social	Look body, face, thought, skin, mind, words	Others things, family, living, friends

2022

In 2022 we see the theme of *People* related to the *Future, Change, Society, Culture* (Table 7) and many more entrants wrote about the concept of Media. Students in years 11–12 discussed the use of technology and the increasing ease of access to information. They made links back to education and the opportunities technology affords by supporting communication with other across the globe. When talking about media, entrants explored the role of social media, including how it is used by young people, as well as the way businesses leverage platforms to create desires—often leading to unrealistic expectations, anxiety, depression and loneliness.

The theme of *Women* appeared again in 2022 where gender equity was a big concern. Students discussed the lack of opportunities for women in leadership roles, sports and education around the globe. Students also wrote about the gender pay gap and equal pay for equal work. Across all years students were concerned with domestic violence and possible solutions to that issue, and many urged governments to do more to address the problem.

Table 7: Main Themes in 2022

YEAR	Year 5 – 6	Year 7 – 8	Year 9 – 10	Year 11 – 12
2022	People world, life, need, things, live, everyone, believe	People world, change, climate, need, children, future, Australia	People world, life, change, need, things, important, future	People world, society, change, media, future, community
	Time day, feel, school, family, friends, home, parents	Life day, things, everyone, look, place, become	Time day, feel, school, family, friends, parents	Life time, love, look, living, parents, someone
	Animals food, year, plastic, trees, ocean, humans	Time family, feel, school, friends, home, parents	Mental health, children, women, society, Australia, media, education	Feel day, school, family, friends, children
	Change stop, environment, future, problem, Australia	Women important, care, health, love, society	Climate animals, human, use, country, environment	Face felt, home, left, mind, heart
	Children someone, others, work, person, happy, women	Animals stop, food, humans, environment	Down eyes, face	Others lives, things, person, different, everyone

2023

In 2023 students explored themes of *Life* and *People* (Table 8). In relation to *Life*, entrants examined concepts of *Time*, *Family*, *Friends*, *Future* and *Health*. As in previous years students wrote about the challenges of managing time and balancing homework, playing with friends and being with family. Again, support from family and friends was an important topic for many writers. For example, year 11–12 students considered how a lack of support networks can potentially result in mental health problems.

In 2023 students wrote more about mental health, including in relation to excessive usage of social media. Many students spoke about ‘addiction’ to social media, negative experiences and the way that unrealistic expectations perpetuated on social media impacts on mental health. As in other years the theme *Down* reflected the creativity of their writing. However, in 2023 *Down* was associated with sadness and other negative emotions. Students reflected on the death of loved ones, and many wrote accounts of losing someone and the associated pain they experienced.

Table 8: Main Themes in 2023

YEAR	Year 5 – 6	Year 7 – 8	Year 9 – 10	Year 11 – 12
2023	People world, need, things, change, live, health, future, Australia	Life time, day, school, family, friends, someone, love, parents	People world, health, social, need, society, change, media, care	Life people, world, health, mental, media, future, society, social
	Life time, day, home, having, look, place, start	People world, need, live, take, better, future, care	Life time, feel, others, family, things, take, love, everyone, friends	Time day, feel, love, take, young, long, someone, feeling
	Animals food, stop, water, year, trees, plastic, environment, pollution	Children health, important, different, work, everyone, others, social	School young, women, Australia, work, future, children, parents	Down eyes, face, left, body, skin, hand
	Children everyone, different, work, money, women, others, education	Change animals, food, year, stop, environment	Down eyes, face, mind, body, felt, heart	Words mind, heart, felt, past, everything, thought
	Family feel, school, friends, love, someone, parents	Down look, face, left, started	Day home, place, look, long, voice	Family different, need, better, women



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Overall:

The identified themes and concepts show that this cohort has a socio-ecological perspective on the *'What Matters? Writing Competition'*. Young people are writing about individual experience, their close relations and the role others play in their lives, about the communities and institutions they interact with, and the policies and issues that impact them. Equally, they are concerned with humanitarian and equitable responses to injustice in the world and the role of non-human forces such as weather and climate. Gender equality is an important concern as are human rights. When writing about 'others,' they often write about their friends and family. At other times they refer to society and nations. They also write about 'everyone' as a collective, especially when thinking about responsibility and the future of the Earth. Analysis shows young people feel a close bond with water, animals, oceans, food, and air and when writing about 'Others' they tend to include these bonds as part of their concerns with the state of the environment.

As in previous years, entrants from 2019 to 2023 were concerned with local and global issues and their essays reflected on the actions, responsibilities and attitudes required for change. The entrants wrote about 'change' occurring on many levels: personal, interpersonal, collective and institutional. When thinking about change entrants often explored the importance of individual behaviour, but they also pointed to the responsibilities of those in positions of power and of institutions. More entrants were exploring concepts of the future through imagining possible futures, both negative and positive. When writing about the future, students saw themselves in it, and many made suggestions about the world they would like to see, the world they will live in. In much of the writing young people located themselves in relation to the world and other inhabitants.

In all years, we see an increase in entrants writing about issues surrounding mental health including an awareness of the need to maintain a healthy lifestyle and the importance of spending time with others to combat mental health issues. The roles of media and social media are of increasing concern to students, especially in relation to mental health.

Young entrants expressed a social, political and future imagery reflecting their views on what should happen in the world. They focus on 'proximate' themes related to their individuality, writing about their personal experiences, personal relationships with family and friends, and their feelings and thoughts. Older entrants wrote more about how society can be improved, and the older students get the more they write about how to achieve positive social change.

The 2019 to 2023 entries also tell us much about how young people feel. Many express emotions like hope as well as fear: for their future, the future of the world and humanity. From lived experiences with family, friends and society, young people imagine the world they could—and should—live in. The entrants express diverse views on what they value, the relationships that are important to them and their connections with the environment and others. Young people argue for a better world and better relationships; giving a hopeful view of the world as they like to see it. In summary, students have written about:

- Environmental issues related to climate change, waste, pollution, use of plastics and the effects of deforestation and global warming on flora and fauna.
- Women's rights and education for women and girls across the world. Young people write about a broad



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range of gender-based issues, including violence against women, opportunities for women and gender-based discrimination such as gender pay gaps and the need for equal pay for equal work. The safety of women is a significant concern and the need to educate young boys and men on respectful relationships is increasingly explored.

- Australia as a nation state is explored through humanitarian, rights and responsibility-based frameworks. The place of Australia within a global network, its role in peace making and the need to provide for those less fortunate than them are key concerns.
- Children's rights, human rights and the importance of social cohesion.
- Environmental issues such as climate change, global warming, deforestation and the extinction of animal and plant species.
- Mental health issues and awareness. Mental health issues are increasingly related to social media use.
- Importance of social relationships, the role of family and friends and the importance of caring for others.

Young People are writing about topical issues

Across the corpus, all age groups are still writing about topical and relevant issues. Leximancer helped us identify some of these issues from year to year and we provide two examples below. While students in 2019–2023 were still writing about topical issues, we found that this cohort was more likely to write about personal and proximal relationships. This may be an effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated public health orders that meant many young people, especially in the capital cities, experienced significant movement restrictions

resulting in learning from home, and the inability to work or to take part in leisure or socialise outside the home. It may also be that young people became more aware of mental health issues, and experienced anxiousness about the future, turning to their families and social networks for support. We also found entrants were increasingly writing about general themes related to the world and people, especially care for others.

When they are writing about current affairs, young people do write about topical issues. For example, in 2019, 2020, 2021 entries reflected on topics related to bushfires, which is unsurprising given the extent of the Australian bushfires during this time. In 2020 we see entrants focusing on issues related to water and climate (post fires and floods). As in the 2020 report, young people specifically address issues that are debated in the media, political, and social arenas. For example, students discussed such issues as increasing homelessness in Australia, funding to rebuild the Sydney stadium, representation of women in the federal parliament, taxation policies on farming and agriculture, the treatment of Indigenous communities, The Voice to Parliament, and the war on Ukraine. Students also wrote about the movement of peoples across the globe, showing humanitarian concern for refugees and asylum seekers while also exploring the sustainability of global movement. They showed concern with high media cases related to the treatment of asylum seekers, reflecting on detention centres such as Woomera, Port Hedland and Baxter. In 2023 young people focused very much on the future and entries about a variety of global conflicts seem to be increasing, with attention paid to Peace and War and the global actors and nation states that play a part in regional conflict.

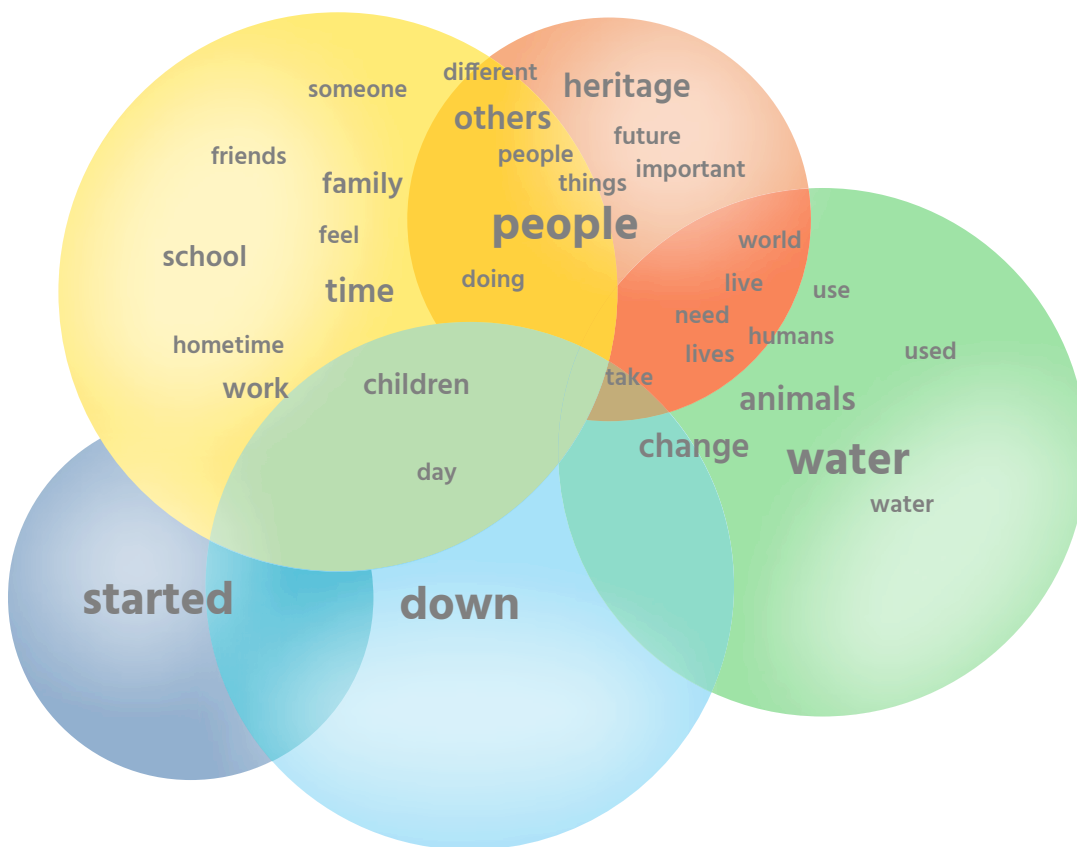


Figure 1: Leximancer map of main themes years 7–8, 2020

Figure 1 shows that entrants from early high school years are engaging with topical issues and are engaged in issues that affect them. In 2020 many entrants wrote about water, water use, water conservation, water as a natural resource and even water in the cycle of global warming. The map indicates that young people in the year 7–8 cohort wrote about *Water* with concepts linked to *Change, the Environment, Animals, Humans, Live* and *Food*. They explored the need for water to maintain life including the rearing of farm animals, growing food and the survival of human beings. Entrants discussed water conservation and actions needed to improve water management. For instance, many students suggested using rainwater for watering plants, taking shorter showers, turning off taps while brushing teeth, and checking pipes for leaks. They wrote about the overuse of water globally and the environmental impacts of agriculture—for instance, the cotton industry and fast fashion—and of industrial use of water. Broadly, water is seen as a precious resource and the need for its sustainable use is important.

This cohort also wrote extensively about water in relation to droughts and fires. There are essays about personal experiences of the 2019 bushfires, including the horrific experiences of neighbours, friends, families and fire fighters. Essays made links between the overuse of water, droughts and bushfires, between old growth forests and water and the scarcity of water in Australia. Issues around water use were sometimes discussed alongside other environmental issues such as coral bleaching, the use of fossil fuels and deforestation.

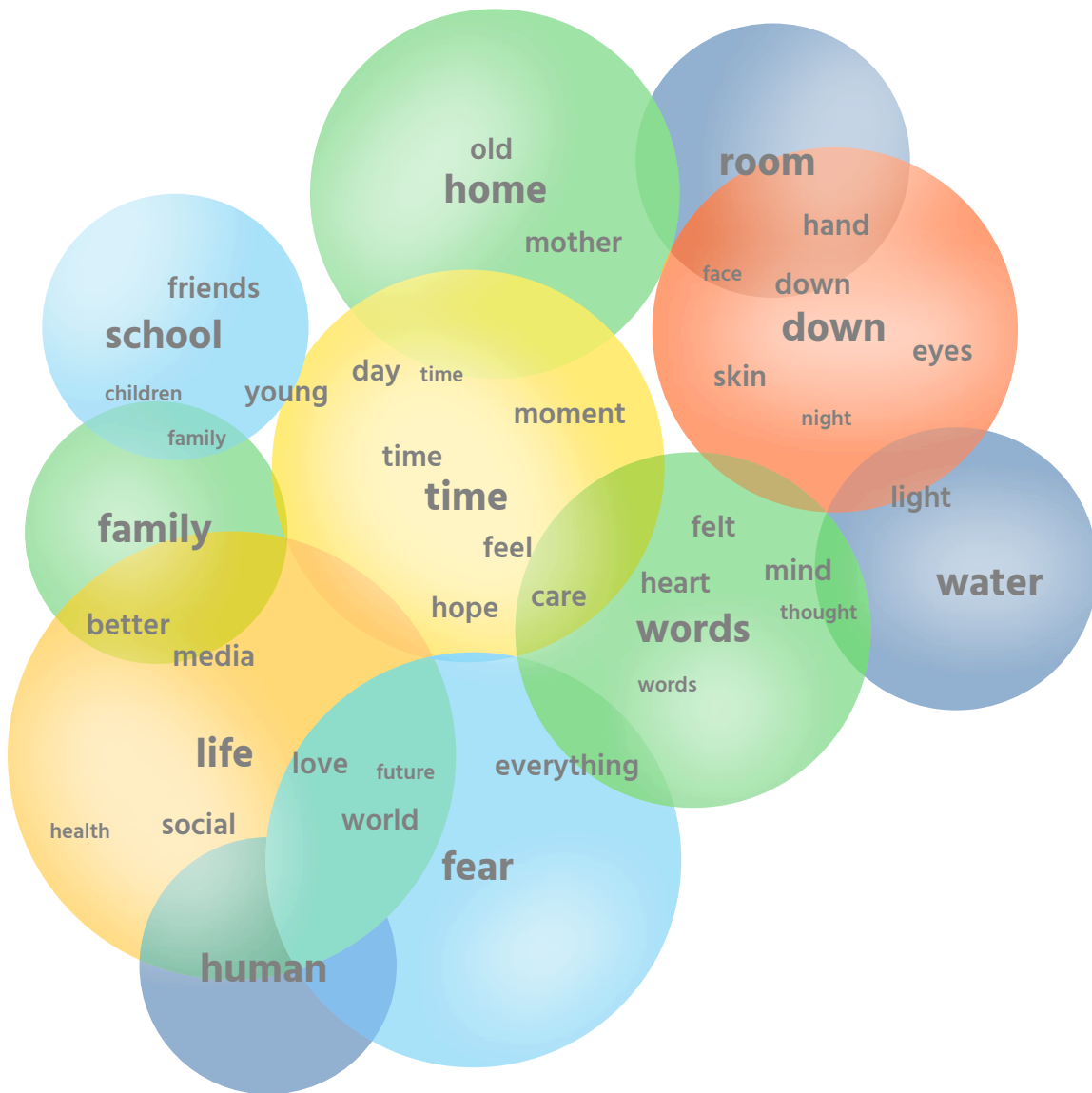


Figure 2: Leximancer map of main themes years 11–12, 2023

In 2023 year 11 and 12 students explored emotions with personal storytelling, and many wrote about their fears and anxieties, and hopes and dreams. Many students drew on personal experiences as well as the literary characters and books that inspired them. All kinds of books are used to explore the current state of the world, including Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.

Feelings were used to explore local and global issues. For example, entrants in 2023 wrote about negative emotions and negative impacts in relation to social media, misinformation, and, unsurprisingly, the environmental destruction of the planet. Interestingly entrants are starting to express fears and *Fear* more readily. Fears canvassed, for example, included the fear of the fragility of humanity, the fear of AI, the fear of violence and propaganda, and even the fear of foreign governments. Some essays related fear with wealthy elites, Donald Trump, government overreach, and such forms of social and political organisation as socialism, communism, capitalism and authoritarianism.

There is an increase in discussions on death, life, the place of humans in the universe and how to face life experiences with hope and love. Young people discussed the concept of *Hope* in conjunction with the concept of *Future* in a responsible manner. For instance, many students hoped that children being born today can see a world at peace, a kinder world. Entrants related Hope with Love as they discussed how love is the most important thing in people’s lives, how love makes things easier, how love inculcates care and kindness and how prioritising love builds a peaceful society.

What topics do young people write about?

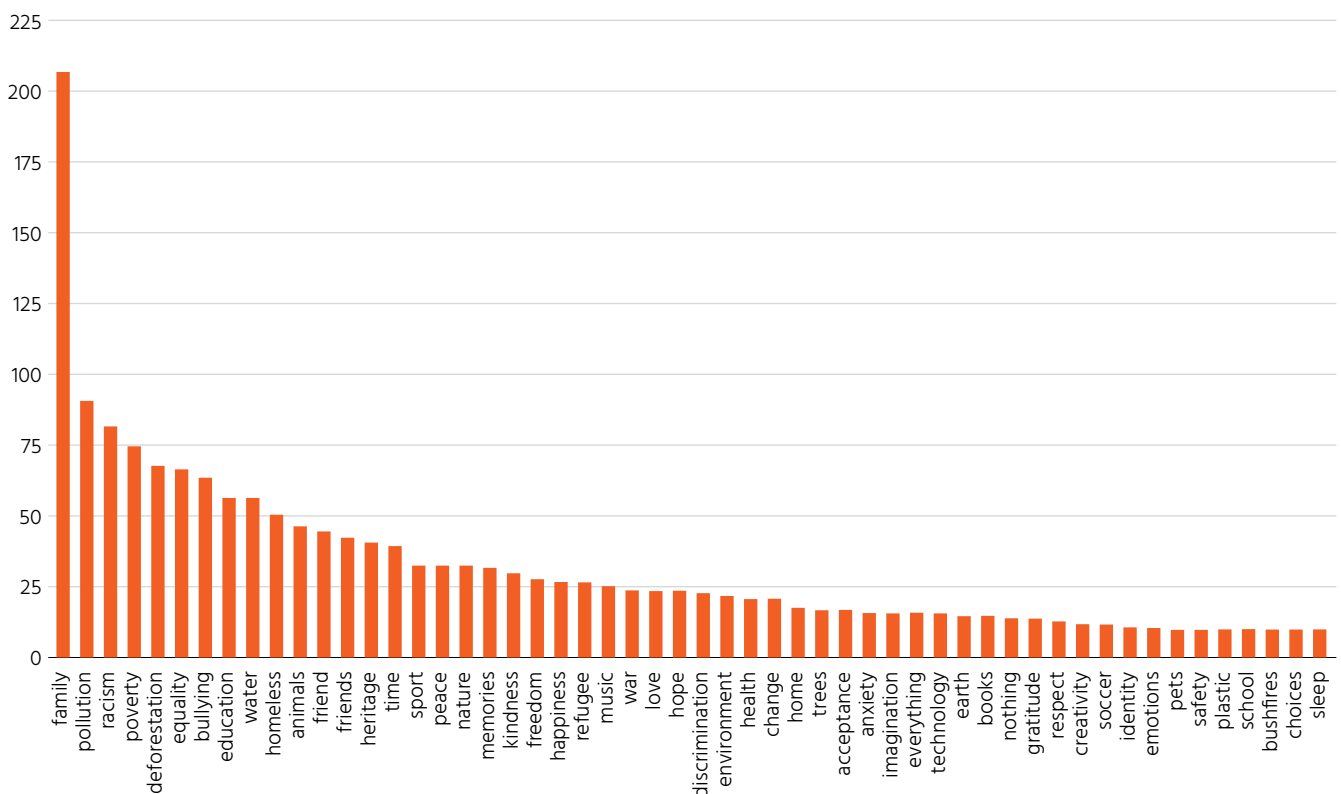
Young people write about a diverse range of topics from creative writing about the world around them to political discussion, personal feelings, their daily lives and what they think of homework (among many other things). To identify the top topics young people are writing about we undertook two forms of analysis for the 2019–2023 period. First, we analysed the entry titles. We first excluded the words ‘What Matters?’ as it related to the competition title. We then identified the top 100 topics by doing a word count on all the entry titles. We then did a keyword density search using SQL, which is a special-purpose programming language designed for managing data in a relational database. Once we identified the top 50 keywords via density, we attributed each entry to these top keywords. Only those entries that fit the top 50 were given a keyword association (based on the frequency of occurrence). This allowed us to group similar entry names for more detailed analysis. For example, ‘Refugee’ and ‘Refugees,’ and ‘Homeless’ and ‘Homelessness,’ would both have previously been two different topics but are now categorised under the broader topics of ‘Refugee’ and ‘Homeless.’ While there are limitations with this approach—for example we don’t capture the full diversity of topics—we can identify many of the *key topics* young people are concerned with when entering the competition. In comparison with the 2010–2018 research, we did not cluster the term environment with other cognate concepts (such as pollution and deforestation), as we wanted to gain a picture of the individual topics young people write about when they address a theme like the environment.

Second, we did a deep dive into certain topics we identified as significant in the 2010–2018 data. The topics *Australia* and *Environment* were chosen to make comparisons with the 2010–2018 data. *Government* was also chosen as an example of a tangible theme within the texts where young people discuss political issues, actions and change. *Health* was selected because it appeared with high frequency and is associated with other key themes of *Environment* and *Mental Health*. These topics are discussed below in the section, ‘What do young people mean when they write about What Matters?’.

Topic by title

The most written about topic according to title in the 2019–2023 data was ‘Family.’ The second most written about topic was ‘Pollution.’ In 2010–2018 the top topics were ‘Bullying’ and ‘Animals’—which were also addressed in 2019–2023 but not as frequently. The graph below shows the top 50 topics for the 2019–2023 entries.

Graph 1: Top 50 Topics 2019 -2023



“Female entrants submitted entries dealing with topics such as ‘Family,’ ‘Equality,’ ‘Bullying,’ ‘Memories,’ ‘Kindness’ and ‘Time,’ while male entrants were more likely to write about topics such as ‘Pollution,’ ‘Deforestation,’ ‘Water’ and ‘Sport.’ Those who identify as non-binary or other submitted essays on topics such as ‘Peace,’ ‘Family,’ ‘Equality’ and ‘Animals’...”

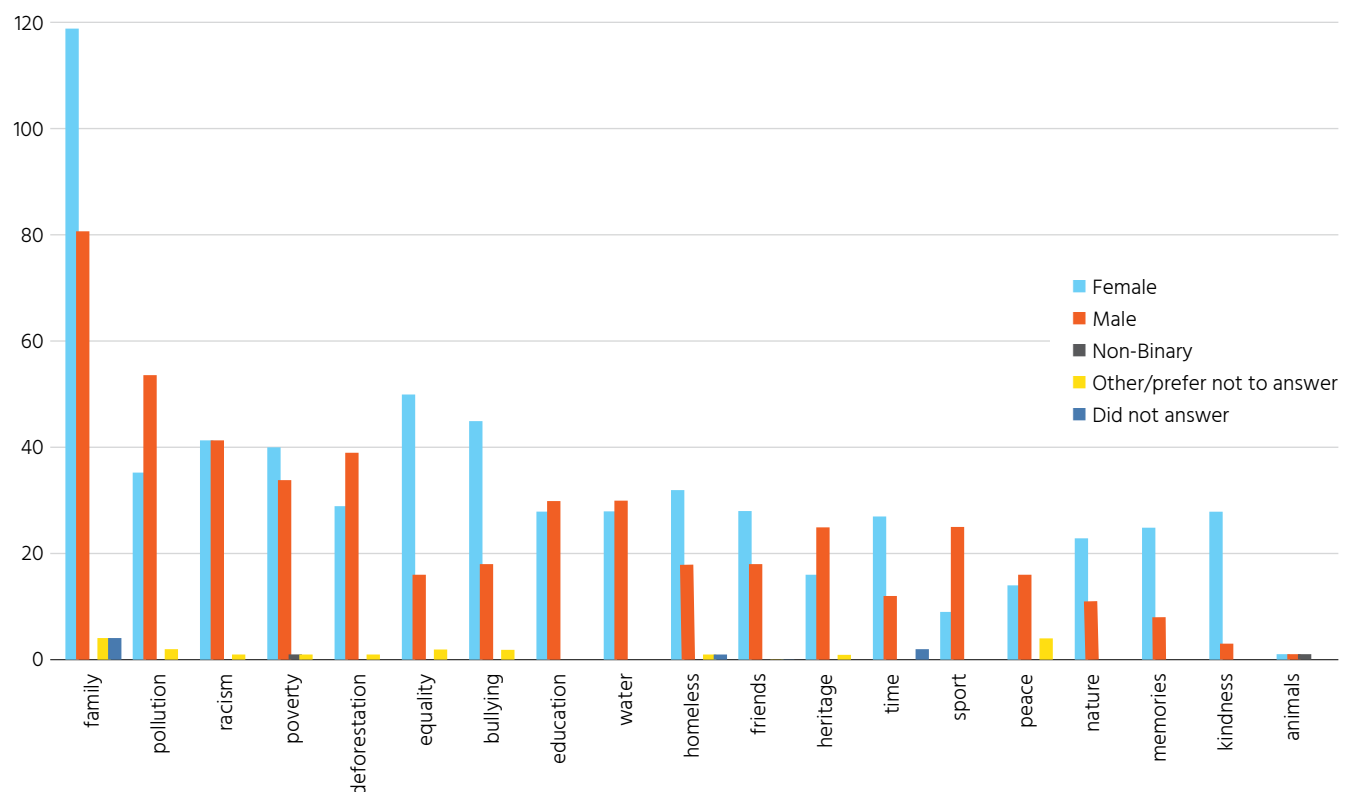
In addition to ‘Family,’ we found that Environmental, social justice and humanitarian topics were more popular. For example, ‘Racism,’ ‘Poverty,’ ‘Equality’ and ‘Deforestation’ have become more important over time. ‘Hope,’ ‘Love,’ ‘Peace’ and ‘War’ still make the top 50 as they did in the 2010–2018 data. ‘Memories,’ ‘Books’ and ‘Emotions’ are newer topics that the 2019–2023 cohorts are concerned with.

Topics and gender

The trend of more young people who identify as female submitting entries to the *What Matters? Writing Competition* continued in 2019–2023. We used the top 20 topics for 2019–2023 to do further analysis via gender. After determining our top keywords via a keyword density search in SQL we then attributed keywords to gender using Excel.

The graph below shows the distribution of top 50 topics by gender. Female entrants submitted entries dealing with topics such as ‘Family,’ ‘Equality,’ ‘Bullying,’ ‘Memories,’ ‘Kindness’ and ‘Time,’ while male entrants were more likely to write about topics such as ‘Pollution,’ ‘Deforestation,’ ‘Water’ and ‘Sport.’ Those who identify as non-binary or other submitted essays on topics such as ‘Peace,’ ‘Family,’ ‘Equality’ and ‘Animals’; but more research is needed to determine what this demographic is writing about, as many of their title entries did not fit into these top 20 key titles. A cursory analysis of these titles show that many in this cohort wrote about identity, with titles such as ‘Who We Are,’ ‘We are a Rainbow,’ ‘Why Can’t Kids Be Themselves’ and ‘Acceptance is Key,’ which is an avenue for further exploration. There are also limitations with analysis via topic: many of the 22,531 entries have unique topic titles that do not fit into any keyword category; or students simply used the competition name as their title.

Graph 2: Top 50 Topics by gender 2019 –2023



How have things changed between 2009/2018 and 2019/2024?

Unsurprisingly entrants are still writing in ways that show understanding of local and global issues. Environmental, humanitarian and social justice concerns are prominent among entrants across all years. Over time we see a focus on increased individual responsibility and action when it comes to addressing the complex challenges of our time. Young people seem to be very aware of the individual actions they can take to make change, especially around environmental issues. At the same time, many young people are writing about the need for collective action, institutional responses and good policy and legislation to create a more just world. As in the previous analysis, they still reflect on government responses to global issues, especially entrants in senior years.

In the last five years, there has been an increase in the amount of young people writing about Family. Students centre their familial relationships in their entries, discussing the support and care they receive from their family. Equally they explore time spent with family and the memories and values they acquire through their relationships. Family is seen as an important support network, one through which students form positive social bonds. Entrants discuss family values and learning attitudes and norms from close family members, as well as issues that affect their immediate families.

There are also some changes since we released our last report in 2020. Mental health has become a greater concern, and more young people are writing about their own capacities and strategies to prevent poor mental health. Interactions with social media have become a greater topic of concern and essays centre on issues related to lifestyle expectations, beauty standards and a decrease in offline interactions that are associated with social media. Equally, though, young people identify many benefits associated with social media use including communicating and socialising online.

In this cohort there is an increased focus on gender-based issues, such as intimate partner violence, gender norms and beauty standards. Through their entries more students are advocating for the empowerment of women, the representation of women in politics and sport, and the need to educate girls and young women for equity, worldwide. Topics that address masculinity are also more evident, though not in great numbers. In these essays young people explore masculine stereotypes, men's mental health, and education around respectful relationships.

As in the previous corpus there is a continuing concern with the future and pressures that young people face. A common theme across all entries is the place of young people in the future of the world. Entries in the 2019–2023 cohort express strong sentiments about the possibilities for their futures as they reflect on the current state of the world. Many express a sense of responsibility for their futures, often arguing that they are the future, or that the future lies with them. Hope for the future and their ability to change the future is also discussed. To experience a future

they want, entrants reflected on actions related to taking responsibility and making changes especially in relation to climate change, the movement of peoples, being socially just and responsible, and caring for others. When writing about the future, many express a sentiment of concern: especially anxiety and worry for their own futures and the future of humanity and the world. There is data to suggest that they may be writing about environmental issues at an earlier age, showing that many young people associated a concern for their own future with the future of the planet.

Finally, we have seen an increase in discussions on care, caring and caring actions related to change. For example, young adults write specifically about caring for the Earth, identifying actions that could harm the planet, such as the use of plastic, caring for family as it holds the source of love, and caring for others by taking actions to provide them with a safer and secure environment.

What do young people mean when they write about 'What Matters?'

Much research on what concerns young people is at the thematic level; for example, notable surveys ask what issues matter (Mission Australia) and some focus on particular topics such as *Climate Change* (Arnot et al., 2023) or *Health* (Kang et al., 2018). In the *What Matters?* entries, while we see the same themes over the years, topics and issues vary from year to year and among school age groups. For example, entrants address the theme of racism and experiences of racism in sport, daily life and even job applications. The topics they use to explore the issue of racism change over time. They range from school settings to discussing systemic racism against Indigenous communities and conversations about racism at family dinner tables.

In the next section we discuss the topics *Australia*, *Environment*, *Government* and *Health*. Keyword searches were used to identify essays that address these topics and then essays containing these key words were grouped and analysed in Leximancer for each year level by year (2019–2023). To explore what young people mean when writing about topics we analysed a subset of entries from each year.

Australia

Essays written about Australia highlight the connected and continuing relations young people attribute to Australia as a nation state, within an international global system. They reflect on Australia within a broader set of concerns related to the environment and climate change, the movement of peoples, human rights frameworks and institutional and collective action. Entries that discuss Australia construct it as a 'fortunate' country with abundant resources and high-quality health, education and political systems. Entrants often argue Australia, as a nation state, has responsibilities to other global actors: having a fortunate place in the global system means helping those who are less fortunate. Essays reflect on the Australian

government's current and past policies on global warming, situating Australia within a global system, and argue that more must be done to preserve the natural environment, mitigate the effects of rapid deforestation and act for future generations. While exploring these issues entrants point to the consequences if no action is taken, including changing weather patterns and the death of flora and fauna globally.

Students emphasise principles of care and reciprocity when they write about global responsibility and Australia's place in global systems. As previously, entries are concerned variously with the future of work, pollution and plastics, homelessness and economic inequality including income gaps between women and men. Students seem to be writing about Australia earlier in this cohort, where we see more entrants from years 5 and 6 including the word Australia. By contrast the 2010–2018 data students from years 9 and 10 formed the largest group to include the word Australia in their essays.

“Young people write about Government in many ways. Entries discussed the actions of Australian Government policy on issues such as Deforestation, Homelessness, Climate Change and Mental Health.”

Under the broad theme of Australia entrants wrote about many topics. These topics include key political events such as *Covid-19 in Australia, Bushfires in Australia, Floods in Australia* and *National Sorry Day (National Day of Healing)*. They explored human rights concerns in relation to the *Rights of Aboriginal Australians* and *Rights of all people* and reflect on Australia within a broader set of international systems.

Many entrants are concerned with humanitarian and social justice issues in relation to Australian policy; this is reflected in topics such as *Opportunities for All, Just Policy for All, Equality for All* and *Approaches to Counteract Racism* and *Move Towards Inclusion*. Institutional and community responses including policy issues are also reflected in topics such as *Homelessness, Youth Cyberbullying, Marginalisation of Women, Women in the Workforce, Equal Rights and Pay for Women, Sexual Harassment, Domestic Violence, Indigenous Education* and *Switching to Clean Energy*.

The relationship between *Australia's Future* and the *World's Future* concerns these writers. This is evident in essays that discuss *Population Growth, Immigration, Consumption of Resources, Space Exploration for Future* and *Australia's Housing Landscape*. Entrants explore the status of gender equality in Australia, reflecting on both past and current events. For example, students write about the treatment of Julia Gillard in parliament as they explore *Sexism* in Australia. The treatment of women in Australia is a persistent topic of concern and students reflect on statistics around *Domestic Violence, Physical Assault, Harassment in Educational Campuses* and *Gender Inequality*. Entrants show knowledge and analysis of recent events that highlight gendered inequalities and the gendered nature of violence exploring recent high media profile cases such as the rape of *Britanny Higgins* and hope for stricter policies to stop the recurrence of such cases.

Government

There are consistent discourses across the cohort that reflected the ways young people think about Government. There were also specific issues that young people wrote about where they addressed what Governments should and can do about the issues they are describing. Entrants wrote about the importance of Government action, as well as collective action taken by themselves or other citizens. This is perhaps not surprising given students were writing in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and significant events such as bushfires in 2020 and floods in 2022. The role of Government in responding to crisis is understood by students, and they question the type and extent of responses while suggesting alternatives. For instance, young people believe the government can build more social housing, provide greater funding for mental health and family violence programs, include young adults in decision making, increase investment in public education, create new jobs, provide more bins and

create clean-up groups for beaches and creeks. Government responses to national issues were frequently debated.

Young people write about Government in many ways. Entries discussed the actions of Australian *Government policy* on issues such as *Deforestation, Homelessness, Climate Change* and *Mental Health*. Governments were discussed as important political actors that have responsibilities and resources to act on issues. Young people also wrote about Government in relation to specific public concerns, like the *Gender Pay Gap, Domestic Violence, Life of Refugees in Detention Centres, Healthcare, Poverty and Education*, and the *Needs of Vulnerable Groups*.

The younger year groups (years 5–6 and 7–8) discuss the role of Government in providing equal opportunities for all. Their essays explore the role of Government in the creation of a more equitable society. These young adults write about the *Stolen Generations, Dying Flora and Fauna, Welfare and Education of Indigenous Australians, Refugees Health, Treatment in Detention Centres, Education of Children in Centres, Renewable Energy* and *Cyberbullying*. In their entries they consider *Leadership* and focus on leadership and individual leaders and their responses and ability to provide policies to help with these issues. Government leaders are asked to provide proactive responses to current challenges, including policies for climate change after bushfires. Government leadership is sometimes called into question, as entrants reflect on local issues that receive media attentions (for example Scott Morrison's response to the Black Summer bushfires). Governments are often called on to *Promote Qualities of Equality, Fairness* and *Support for Others* in entries. These essays are often coupled with a discussion on how the Australian Government should direct funding or redistribute wealth to help solve these issues. Interestingly, young people focus on major issues collectively, such as *Climate Change*, which has added to the devastating

bushfires and floods occurring in Australia, and call for policies to combat them. Young people think about their own responsibility in changing policies themselves when writing about Government. They talk about the power of spreading awareness and undertaking peaceful protests to ensure they play their role in solving these issues. The essays have a positive attitude and provide critique of politicians, policies and political parties in solving issues such as *Poverty, Education, Safety, Gendered Biases* and *Sustainable Environment*.

Entries show concern with *Inclusiveness* in Parliament, discussing the importance of the voices of women, Indigenous people and young people themselves in the Parliament. When they talk about themselves in roles of *Leadership*, young people often write about responsibility. Entries from year 9–10 and 11–12 students are more likely to discuss the achievements of the *Australian Government* over the past decades. Essays discuss development of policies ensuring female participation in the work force, the *Use of Plastics, Investments in Technology for Ocean Cleanups*, and *Financing Studies for Effects of Pollution on Marine Life*. Many entrants ask questions about what it means to live in society, and the role that government plays in a socially cohesive and fair world. For example, have governments done enough to ensure Australia is a successful multicultural, diverse, equal society? Explorations of Indigenous issues are found throughout students' entries. Essays explored the inclusion of an Indigenous 'Voice to Parliament' and the disadvantages systems can create for Indigenous people. For example, students discuss systemic issues that Indigenous Australians face such as pay gap disparity, access to housing, lower health outcomes and mental health issues. As in the previous report, the Apology to Indigenous peoples and the Stolen Generations made by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd are topics of interest for young people as are concerns about what current and future governments can do to make a difference to systemic issues.

When writing about *Government* students even explore the concept of *Democracy*, asking questions about power and position. Interestingly as students get older, they are more likely to ask questions that they then explore in their essays, provoking thought and debate. For example, they explore the pros and cons of changing policies towards *Women, Minorities, Inclusion* and *Climate Change*. They sometimes explore how *Government* policies can perpetuate *Exclusion*; for instance, they write about previous assimilation policy for Indigenous communities that resulted in impacts still felt today. They further discuss the importance of the equal representation of women in parliament, urging the government to push for equal opportunities for the health of democracy, arguing that gender representation has tangible effects on the functioning of a democracy. When writing about Government, entrants explore the concept of governance, and even what governments are meant to do, both locally and globally. At times young people write about a distrust in government and individuals within government and question the personal motives of those in parliament, and the power they have. As they get older, young people also write about being political, their own political actions, and citizenship. They are more aware of democratic tensions of *Freedom* and *Security*, and essays include reflections on *Government Technological Surveillance*.

Environment

Essays that include the word *Environment* reflected a diversity of content. These essays covered responsibilities, issues, actions, actors and change, especially for future generations. The theme encompassed the *Natural Environment, Physical Environment, Healthy Environment, Safe Environment* and *The Relationships of Humans to the Environment*. Entries discussed the importance and responsibility of individuals in creating a *Better and Healthier Environment, Reduction of Carbon Footprint* and *Fixing Earth for Future Generations*. Essays often asked the readers to consider the importance of the physical environment and to look around them and understand that human survival is directly related to the survival of the planet. Many writers asked the question intended to inspire thought in the reader, for example: 'Does the environment mean anything to you?' We see an increase in essays writing mostly about *Environment* over time but also about local environment issues that receive a lot of media attention. In these entries, students wrote about human behaviour when it comes to environmental catastrophes such as bushfires, floods and droughts; students argued that selfish human behaviour and disregard for the environment is to blame. Young people are especially worried about the loss of koalas during the bushfires, showing engagement with important national events and debates.

When talking about the environment entrants wrote consistently about Animals. They also canvassed the need for *Reducing Carbon Footprint, Reducing Wastage, Shifting to Solar Power* and *Becoming a Climate Activist*. As noted previously, essays often mentioned the climate activist Greta Thunberg and how she has inspired them to act on climate change. These actions include reducing their own carbon footprint and spreading awareness about climate change in their schools. School is also discussed as a place where students learn about how to reduce their impact on the environment.

The *Future* is a major concern for young people writing about *Environments*. *Healthy Environment* and the relation of the environment to human beings are apparent. Essays discuss how bringing harm to the environment brings harm to every human being. Young people see issues of *Global Warming, Economic Development* and *Poverty* as interconnected. For example, young people often call for action around changing living conditions for those living in poverty, reducing income gaps and creating a harmonious environment for all to subsequently care for the natural environment. Similarly, essays on the *Environment* include discussions about *Safety, Peace* and *Education*. In their essays, young people write that safer environments for women and children need to be created globally. They link education and awareness about consent and healthy relationships as a major action to create safer environments.

Interestingly, essays for the years 11–12 cohort called for major changes to the education systems and for policies that protect the environment to help future generations. The sentiment of empathy is evident in their essays, as they want to help younger generations. We see this cohort asking questions about the society they live in and what needs to change.

Health

Essays that included the word *Health* are mainly concerned with the issue of *Mental Health*, though entrants also write about the health of the environment, physical health and healthcare. Young people discuss the importance of *Health* and write about their *Own Health*, the *Health of their Family, Friends, the Environment* and the *Global Health of People*. Discourse around health is principally about opportunities to live a happy life. *Environmental Health* is discussed with links to improving *Social Health* and the 'health' of Australia and global society. Links are made between health and the environment. For example, addressing issues such as deforestation and combat climate change are linked to good health outcomes. Students also connect the need to address climate change with that of reducing *Mental Health* issues. This includes societal level changes, as well as the everyday practical efforts of young people themselves. Entries include examples such as collecting and recycle bottles in their schools and donating money to youth mental health services such as Reach Out Australia.

Entrants are concerned about the *Mental Health of Stolen Generations, Cyber Bullying* and *Teen Mental Health, Mental Health Awareness, Mental Health Stigma, Men's Mental Health* and *Increasing Suicide Rates*. Again, we see young adults write with empathy about others, especially children, who have mental health issues. The trend to individualise and take responsibility for actions is also seen in the theme of *Mental Health*. When writing about *Mental Health* writers take on the tasks of raising awareness and advocating for others. In their discourse, they focus on breaking the stigma surrounding mental health and the need to educate people. For instance, many authors wrote about how to deal with *Depression* and *Anxiety* and argued that these issues need to be addressed through education. Other students wrote about the increasing pressures of *Homework* and schoolwork, resulting in *Stress* and *Anxiety*. Many entrants discussed how they miss meals, playtime and socialisation with friends and family during exams, which results in bad social health. The older year groups of years 9–10 and 11–12 added how social media creates unrealistic body images and beauty standards, which result in *Depression, Insecurity, Low Self-Esteem* and *Anxiety* if those standards cannot be met. Their essays are thought provoking, as they question the priorities of decision makers in combating these issues. For instance, many students questioned the Tasmanian government's decision to spend ten million dollars on the Derwent Entertainment Centre instead of on adolescent mental health programs.

Entrants also often wrote about *Men's Health*. Young adults challenged the social norms around *Men* by questioning statements such as 'Men keep it to themselves' and 'Men don't cry.' The discourse discussed how *Men* fear not meeting the *Financial* and *Social* expectations of society, and in failing to do so, lose their *Mental Health*. Often essays linked *Unemployment* and *Poverty* as major issues that could potentially result in *Suicide*. Their essays called for such stigmas to break. Some essays focused on the future of mental health, calling for action by developing anonymous helplines for men that can be accessed to talk about their mental health. Older groups



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wrote how *Family* and *Social* ties need to be stronger to help break stigmas around mental health. The writers are aware of gender-based issues related to mental health and noted the need for men to have close friends, family members and connection to community groups where they can express their issues without the fear of being judged. Students also wrote how stereotypes around *Mental Health* need to be broken. They call on the government to improve education from an early age around the issue and improve the infrastructure that supports people with mental health issues. For instance, some students discussed how fear of talking about mental health issues could be daunting, so developing anonymous helplines, psychological support for different age brackets, and help groups could be ways forward.

Lastly, essays also focus on *Economic Pressures* as additional factors for deteriorating *Mental Health*. Young adults identify increasing *Housing Costs, Affordability* and *Consumerism* and link them to *Mental Health* issues. They question how we measure a good society and explore ideas that link care and welfare as determinants of a good society, rather than *GDP (Gross Domestic Product)*. Many students call for the Australian government to measure its success based on *Welfare, Kindness* and *Well-Being* in society. *Welfare* is seen as a global issue and linked to *Global Public Health* in other countries. Entrants also write how *Economic Inequality* is affecting people's health with lack of access to *HealthCare Services* making people unproductive.

IT'S TIME TO
CHANGE OUR
BATTERIES



100% RENEWABLE
ENERGY BY 2050



Restore
The
Balance



In their own words: writing for change

In this section we draw predominantly on interviews with young people who were finalists in the *What Matters? Writing Competition* between 2019–2023. We consider their in-depth reflections on what moves them to write about certain topics, which actors and what actions they think can bring about change, and what political norms and values are reflected in their writing.

What do young people write about and why?

Finalists reported that the *What Matters? Writing Competition* was a vehicle for exploring the topics they felt passionate about. Most pieces covered specific topics including climate change, homelessness, disordered eating, Indigenous recognition, religious tolerance and education equality. Finalists also addressed more general themes such as having difficult conversations, connectedness and diversity.

While some finalists wrote about specific topics, others used social issues as contexts to explore wider themes. These included one finalist who used the issue of asbestos poisoning to discuss broader ideas about the impact humans have on one another, as well as on the environment. Another explored women's representation in society through a discussion of gender in parliament and the cabinet. One finalist highlighted the need to listen to children and young people who speak up about social issues. Two finalists reflected on how writing from their lived experience allowed them to draw out wider themes. For example, one entrant wrote about his family's experience with voluntary assisted dying and felt that addressing this topic in his essay helped create opportunities for other difficult or 'controversial' topics. Another of the finalists drew on her experience of grief, using it to call for greater focus on relationships and connectedness.

The main motivation behind student's desires to write about particular topics was to help raise awareness. Young people reported that they mainly learnt about topics through discussions with parents and family and in the classroom, as well as via news and documentary media. Through discussions with the women in her family, Liz (14, NSW), whose piece discussed women's representation in parliament, felt that the competition allowed space to explore a topic that she was 'super passionate about,' adding: 'I have the opportunity to write about something I really love.'

For some entrants, the competition was an opportunity to explore a topic and ways to communicate their ideas in a compelling way. While most of the finalists utilised a more traditional essay format, one finalist, Sonia (15, VIC) produced a creative piece, using columns to tell two, parallel stories, showing different perspectives on life. When asked what the piece was about, they responded that one column was about 'not being too pressured about other factors, just appreciating where you are right now ... not feeling so overwhelmed,' while the other column was about 'a very understandable fear of, like, not amounting to anything, or feeling inferior or being overwhelmed by everything else that's going on.' Young people valued the *What Matters?* competition as a platform to share their views.

Who can bring about change and how?

While many of the finalists were motivated by specific social issues (like climate, youth rights, women's equality) they recognised the relationships between these issues as well as the actors and actions that might bring about change. Entrants identified a range of actors they felt could make a difference: themselves, young people more broadly, and those in positions of authority (i.e. adults). Many finalists expressed a confidence in their ability to advocate for social issues and to help enact change. Participants highlighted that it was young people themselves who could help address challenges, with some noting that they were inspired by other young people. Participant Amelia (15, NSW) cited the role Greta Thunberg has played: 'someone that's young and has, like, a really big impact.' For participant Connor (18, NSW) it was seeing a friend run for a seat in state politics: 'People voted for an 18 year old!' Both participants expressed a strong belief in the general agency of young people: 'everything you do matters' (Amelia); 'if you want to make a change, just go out and do it' (Connor). There was a strong sense among finalists that young people who pursue their convictions can have an impact on the issues that matter to them.

Indeed, some finalists felt that young people are in a unique position to create change, despite having no formal political power. For example, Liz (14, NSW) said that ‘as the future leaders and decision makers of society, they can play a crucial role in achieving change.’ Liz identified some ways in which young people can drive conversations and enact change: ‘[they can] raise awareness, they can challenge stereotypes, they can help reshape societal norms and push for policies that promote equal representation.’

While all interviewees felt that young people should be seen as legitimate actors with rights and the ability to shape society, some finalists were hesitant about their own actions. When asked if they saw themselves as an advocate, some said ‘not yet’:

“I’d say [I’m] not an advocate—just someone who’s always you know, I’ve always had ideas and thoughts and opinions on things, mostly on the inside or just even talking amongst friends. And if issues come up that I’m passionate about, I’ll have a chat with, you know, to friends about it.” (Connor, 18, NSW)

Connor went on to say that these ‘chats’ could become fierce—even political. Similarly, other interviewees talked about how they try to have an influence on their immediate context—family, community and school—through informal conversations and individualised everyday activities such as donating to a cause, and supporting organisations and other activists. Many noted that school commitments and feelings of uncertainty or inadequacy due to age were significant reasons for not getting more involved in civic and political action. Several interviewees did regard being more active in the future as a possibility: ‘I really hope I do eventually do it, because I think not like, as an obligation per se, but I think if I have the power to do something, I should try and do it’ (Sonia, 15, VIC). Universities were often identified as a site where they might become more active and that being an older young person was a time when there would be greater possibility of creating change. For example, Regina (17, NSW) felt she was more likely post-school to join in ‘advocacy or maybe like a protesting group.’

In addition to young people themselves acting as potential agents of change, many of the finalists also identified that those in positions of authority have greater responsibility to take action on social issues. They also noted that actively listening to young people in the process is crucial. Finalists indicated that the attitudes and actions of parents, teachers and politicians were important in this regard: ‘if young people are growing up around having these discussions being accepted and not being dismissed, it’ll naturally encourage them to do it on their own’ (Sonia, 15, VIC). In this way, Sonia described how the attitudes of adults towards young people really matter and can be barriers as well as enablers for young people’s civic and political participation. Respondents described a need to change perceptions about who young people are in society and what role that they can play.

At the same time, finalists acknowledged that those in elected positions of power have a specific role to play in addressing the issues that matter. Sara (15, NSW) highlighted

that there was not one population that was solely responsible, arguing that it depended more on a relationship between young people/the citizenry and those in power:

“I think, obviously, our local politicians are definitely in more of a position than we are to actually create policies to provide help. But I think that we’re the people that they listen to. And so that basically means that if we’re able to get through to them, then we are creating, like the policies for whatever the issue we are advocating for.”

Finalists wanted politicians to engage better with young people and to respond to what they have to say by doing more on the key issues that young people are writing about.

What does taking action look like?

Taking action for young people comes in various forms, from traditional methods of raising awareness to more formalized modes of community and political engagement.

Many entrants refer to the role of everyday conversation and debate. As Hannah (20, NSW) put it:

“you can have strong ideas, but ... if you can’t debate them, and if you can’t sit there and hear someone’s conflicting idea, then really, do you feel quite strongly? Do you really have a strong foundation in your own idea? And I try to really challenge myself to be able to engage in conversations.”

Other finalists suggested that discussing and exchanging ideas was key to developing values and ideas about what matters and how we achieve individual and collective goals. For finalist Ben (20, NSW), discussion was meant to be robust’ suggesting that if it isn’t ‘you’ve either got a problem, or, or something not worthy of debate.’ Connor also suggested that ‘You have to be able to understand any point of view,’ before offering up ‘I think if more people did it, society would be a nicer place.’ For some, sharing opinions and engaging in debate and difficult conversations is a challenge. Individualised channels—including platforms such as *What Matters?*—are seen as safe and important.

Many finalists were focused on awareness raising: from letter-writing to posting and sharing content online. While one finalist was sceptical about the effectiveness of letter writing—‘but people can just not read letters’ (Chloe, 17, VIC)—others thought it was still valid: ‘even if it might not create anything, I think that it definitely is a great step’ (Sara, 15, NSW). One finalist described the impact letter writing could play, reflecting on a letter-writing campaign at her college that led to a government Minister reading her letter in the house: ‘it was amazing to see that direct impact’ (Hannah, 20, NSW).

The role of social media for awareness raising and expressing solidarity was frequently mentioned. This was typically in relation to how young people can share their political beliefs and values. For example, when discussing issues that impact on indigenous Australians, Hannah (20, NSW) highlighted that while they might be considered ‘little things,’ there was significance in ‘posting to my social media, making sure, like reposting from Aboriginal

“We have previously identified that the *What Matters?* entries reveal some of the political norms and values that young people hold.”

organisations.’ In doing so, it was ‘making it known that you’re an ally.’ Sara (15, NSW) suggested that adding your own voice to the social media chorus ‘can actually be really effective, because that brings the issue to light for politicians.’ Regina (17, NSW) shared that while there were some shortcomings with using social media, such as misinformation and harm, there were benefits too: ‘for young people, it’s making the choice to use social media for good. I feel like that’s the biggest and most successful opportunity for us to be involved with democracy.’

Some finalists also discussed the need for more direct ways to address community or social issues. Sara discussed her experience volunteering with homelessness charities, where she could directly interact with and benefit from community engagement. Others, such as Amelia (15, NSW), thought donating to organisations was the best way to contribute, adding ‘I think donating is important because often like, I mean, one person can definitely make a difference.’

In addition to these more ‘hands-on’ modes of taking action, other finalists discussed specific, formalised opportunities to take action. Ben (20, NSW) actively participated in a council of students that advised the Minister on students’ views on various issues. Similarly, Sara (15, NSW) discussed how Youth Advisory Councils can play a key role in giving young people a space to have their voice heard in a local council context. Building on the recent referendum for an Indigenous voice to parliament, Ivy (12, NSW) proposed the idea of a ‘young children’s voice to parliament,’ stressing that the experiences of young people matter and should play a key role in decision making. Doing so would mean that ‘adults would take us more seriously instead of just viewing us as just kids,’ adding that ‘at the end of the day it’s [young people] who’s gonna be leading the country. And if, yeah, issues that affect kids right now or this generation, they should have a say about that to Parliament.’

Political norms and values

We have previously identified that the *What Matters?* entries reveal some of the political norms and values that young people hold. The most prominent of these were *Participatory*, *Reflexive*, *Deliberative*, and *Intergenerational* (Collin and Hugman, 2020). In analysing the 2019–2023 entries and speaking to finalists we find that these norms are also present—and there are also some noticeable changes and additions. Young people reflect the following views on what norms and values constitute politics:

Plurality: Much as young people demonstrate a desire for a polis that is intergenerational in its constitution, modes of deliberation and decision-making, they also reflect an understanding that the world and the issues we face are shaped and shared through the relations between different people, places, non-human life forms and non-living things. This is expressed in who they see as constituents of what matters and why, as well as the importance of difference and diversity.

Justice: Young people express a strong concern for equity and fairness both in relations between people and things, as well as goals of a good society. One of the most consistent themes to emerge from the interviews was a willingness and an active desire to discuss and be open to a range of different views. Young people are reflexive: ‘it’s not like fair of us to push that we are the right way of experiencing or believing something. Because who gave us that authority?’ (Sonia, 15, VIC). Sonia explained how this concern is manifest in considering different perspectives and needs and how they can be attained. Some students write about institutions and how justice can be achieved. However, most explore the way equity and fairness are manifest in through *Care*. Writers explore many kinds of care: care about; care to; care for; and the absence of care.

Anticipatory: Young people write about things that they value as well as their worries and hopes for society. They demonstrate awareness of the significant—in some cases, existential—threats to society and also what qualities and characteristics a ‘good society’ should have. These needs and threats are overwhelmingly framed by a concern for the future: what it holds, what it can be and how it can be achieved. Futurity is everywhere in the corpus and young people call for others to be concerned for the future, to take action for a better future and for decision-makers to secure the future through making it a priority of decision-making in the present.

Affective: Many interviewees reflected on the role of affect. For example, Liz shared that observing social issues like homelessness made her feel compelled to do something: ‘as I learned more about like the world and like, its problems, like the more I kind of developed a kind of sense of, of like, I don’t know, I needed to do more.’ As Liz later sums up: ‘Well, I think emotion is like what drives like, you’re, you’re like passionate spirit.’ Young people readily recognise and reflect on the emotions that drive their interests and see value in surfacing and working with these to create change. Young people talk about the role emotions and moral thinking play in how they see politics and how they communicate what matters. Many young people used story-driven approaches to addressing social issues, rather than relying solely on impersonal statistics and facts. As Connor (18, NSW) indicates, ‘the reason that we start with a personal anecdote, when we’re writing about something, is to give a face to the story’; later he suggests that in just focusing in on the statistics, it can end up ‘keeping things the way they are, because it hasn’t affected you yet. You know, when things don’t affect you, personally, it’s easy to turn a blind eye.’ Young people also described a legitimate role for emotion in driving the passion they felt regarding particular ideas or issues and feel compelled to do something about them. For example, finalists Sara (15, NSW) and Liz (14, NSW), described how observing homelessness sparked an emotional response that led them to want to do something about the issue: ‘it was very uncomfortable because neither of us really knew what to do or what to



say or like how to behave ... I don't think we were aware of how we could best approach that situation' Sara (15, NSW).

Sara's quote above also illustrates an observable change in the way young people articulate their interest or concern for issues compared with what they say they can do about them. While young people want to be involved in shaping society—and see a role for them and their peers—in this cohort of essays we see them more likely to identify the power (and responsibility) of governments and other actors in positions of authority. This could be a period effect—students in this cohort entered the competition during and immediately after the pandemic and a series of extreme climate events in Australia (bushfires and floods). It may also be that there is an emerging gap between young people's concerns and what they think they, individually and as members of communities, can do about them.

What barriers and enablers to participation do young people identify?

Finalists discussed multiple factors that they felt either facilitated or hindered their ability to meaningfully influence the world around them. Many described how some factors can both facilitate and obstruct their sense of agency.

School

Entrants describe an important role for schools—both for the relationships and knowledge that can spark and support civic and political interest. Some finalists highlighted the key role teachers played in giving space for them to consider specific social issues. Participant Connor (18, NSW) stated that it was a 'few good teachers in high school, I'd say helped a lot.' Hannah (20, NSW) had more of a profound experience in speaking with teachers around a particular social issue. When discussing her thoughts on an issue of welfare support for Indigenous students with her debating coach, the ability to have an open conversation shifted Hannah's perspective: 'and he was like ... that's actually not true at all, and explained. And it was one of those moments that completely shifted my view on this issue.' However, others felt let down by their education, which they feel does not teach them enough about politics or important social issues. Amelia described how important issues such as climate change are not routinely dealt with in the curriculum, unless there is a teacher with a particular interest, and this meant young people felt their learning and actions was being restricted: 'it was never like taught like a syllabus or anything. I don't think at least not for me' (Amelia, 15, NSW). Some students turn to their parents to discuss important social issues, rather than teachers or peers at school: 'I guess I'd be more comfortable like speaking to like my mum than like my teachers' (Liz, 14, NSW). Some students discuss the importance of civic and political education for young people to take part fully in civic and political life as they get older, suggesting that it 'only works if we have good civic education ... because, if people don't have that, then that kind of engagement is impossible' Ben (20, NSW). Ben highlighted that it is only through a strong civics education that young people can feel equipped to discuss difficult issues with others and

be engaged in these discussions. Some students identify school—and other institutions such as parliaments—as particularly undemocratic for the way young people are excluded from taking part in meaningful discussions and decision-making on topics that really matter.

Parents and Friends

In keeping with the literature on political socialisation, parents and friends are significant for shaping and encouraging views on social and political issues. For Ivy (12, NSW), her mother, in particular, played a key role in giving space to talk about major political issues: 'I talk about things that make me feel distressed or things I'm confused about with my mum ... And she often helps me explain. She often explains what it means. How, why, like, the reason behind the war in Gaza and the history behind it and explains that it's okay to feel that way.' In addition to providing a space for their child to explore issues, parents were a resource, helping their child learn about issues and form social and political views and values. The important influence of parents was clear among finalists in particular:

"I come from a household full of like, strong women, like my, my grandparents, my Aunties, my sisters, my mom, they've all kind of deeply influenced to like, my perspective on gender equality, and women's empowerment. And I've always had, like, strong like, feelings towards, like, women's rights. And, I mean, yeah. Mainly, it stems from like, my, like, my mom and I, we've always like, talked about this, sometimes we just have chats about, like, like, women's, like, lack of representation."

Similar feelings were also shared by Ben (20, NSW), who reflected on the role the family home played, and in particular the ways his parents shaped his own political values: 'I think I'm of the view that you're almost entirely a product of your context, and that my parents are both Labor voters through and through. I'm now a member of the Labor Party and a Labor Party, you know, voter through and through.'

Friendships also played a key role in young people's sense of civic and political agency—and are connected to the broader desire students expressed for safer and more informed deliberation on issues. For example, Thalia (17, TAS) noted: 'it's so important that we do speak to our friends but having really hard conversations, we don't necessarily have the tools yet'. For others, however, there was a sense that in starting the conversation, common ground could be found. For Sara (15, NSW), it was only through sharing her topic with her friends and hearing their perspectives that she felt more equipped and knowledgeable: 'hearing it actually voiced aloud was definitely, like something that made it stick more in my head about what, what our youth actually thinks about this.' Some finalists said they feel most comfortable discussing social issues, especially complex and confronting issues, with their friends.



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Agism

Entrants recognise how civic and political institutions, and everyday cultures, privilege adults' views of the world and frequently exclude and marginalise young people on the basis of age alone. Age was mostly understood as a hindrance to taking action and as something that unnecessarily held them back, largely due to the restrictions placed around young people's formalised political engagement. When considering ideas, such as lowering the voting age, some finalists reflect common, deficit narratives of young people. For example, Max (14, NSW) and Ethan (17, NSW) were both hesitant about shifting the voting age because of concerns that 16-year-olds aren't 'mature' or 'experienced' enough. Another finalist, Ivy suggested that lowering the voting age might result in young people 'being confused,' adding that 'most kids would be biased towards what their parents vote' (Ivy, 12, NSW). In contrast, others thought the current laws meant that young people's political engagement was 'unnecessarily restricted.' Ben advocated for lowering the voting age to 14, the same age a young person can be held

criminally responsible: 'I'd say so, for that group of people [between 14–18 years old], there's a problem. Yes, you can be politically engaged. But there is a limit and the most, I suppose, fundamental expression of your political opinion is not allowed.' Other young people agreed that expanding the franchise could help facilitate a more substantial engagement with the political process. Liz (14, NSW) thought that lowering the age to 16 would 'give them like some responsibility, maybe even inspire them to learn more about like politics.' Finalists agreed that access to formal decision-making is an important way for young people to have a direct say on issues impacting them and to become more engaged: 'you would definitely view politics differently, if you knew that you got the opportunity as a child to be voting about it' (Sara, 15, NSW). Another finalist, Chloe (17, VIC) added that, '16-year-olds have opinions and have ideas that need to be shared. They are active parts of the population, they deserve to be represented. Is there really a difference between 18 and 16? I'm not sure.'



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Social Media

Alongside legacy media such as news and documentaries, finalists discussed the role social media played in shaping how they learn about social issues. For Amelia (15, NSW), accessing information and watching stories on social media helped to shape her own knowledge. This meant that she and other young people could ‘educate ourselves on, like, hundreds of different topics,’ which can, in turn, ‘expand their mindsets ... helps them think for themselves and, like, create their own path.’ Social media also provides a sense of community and connection. Sonia described how following YouTubers who speak on social issues is motivating: ‘[It] makes me feel more inspired to think on what’s been going on. And then sometimes I look at issues that like affect, specifically the people around me, and that gets me to look into those more’ (Sonia, 15, VIC).

At the same time, entrants are also aware of the need to think critically about what they’re seeing on social media, especially on platforms like TikTok. They also described a need for balance between adopting opinions from online content and forming their own views.

For example, Regina reflected on how social media provided some context for her concerns, but that it was through experience that she ‘kind of formed my own opinion, rather than following exactly what, you know, these influences or whoever I’m following are saying’ (Regina, 17, NSW). Others were optimistic about how social media helps spread awareness of an issue, but that it can also be limited to ‘like minds’ in ‘echo chambers’ and:

“... sometimes there’s a disconnect with online activism and the desired effect of it reaching the top, I think it doesn’t always quite get there. Yeah. So sometimes young people could get their voices heard on, say online, but also sometimes it doesn’t quite, you know, get to the federal government, for example.” (Connor, 18, NSW)



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Discussion:

Why What Matters To Young People Matters For Us All

This study aimed to advance understanding of what is important to young people and why. By examining the essays submitted to the *What Matters? Writing Competition* between 2019–2023, we sought to build on the knowledge generated in our previous study of entries from between 2010–2019, and to demonstrate how young people’s views and expectations have persisted or changed. Our intention has been to provide a deeper appreciation of what matters to young people and what they hope will be done to ensure these things are addressed—and by whom. Our findings contribute to the broader field of youth research, explain the significance of youth views and aspirations in turbulent times, and provide insights into how what matters to students and young people today also matters for Australian society and democracy more broadly.

In doing so, we have found many continuities with the views expressed by young people between 2019–2023 with those who took part in the competition between 2010–2018. Young people reflect significant diversity in their writing. This is evident both in the topics they write about, and in the meanings and views they express. Many understand the interrelationships between different topics: for example, that the benefits and potential harms of *Social Media* are also related to how *Women* are treated in society and to the role of *Education*. Similarly, they are still writing about *War*, *Refugees* and *Human Rights* and relate different issues to individual and collective values, as well as *Australian Democracy* and the role Australia plays in the world.

Young people also continue to reflect the civic values and norms we identified in our last report. They value familial, peer and community relationships, they have a ‘global citizen’ sensibility, they express an ethics of care for others and things around them, they value good leadership and they want institutions that act to better society. But we have also identified some important changes and new trends.

The Future Matters

This report has shown that young people are increasingly expressing greater concern for the future. Between 2010 and 2018 entrants also demonstrated a concern for the future, but in the five years since we have identified a marked increase and intensity in the ways young people write in relation to the future. Entrants write more directly about what the future looks like for them, and what kind of a world they want to live in. The future is something that entrants explore at the individual, national and global levels. For example, when writing about the future many entrants discuss their own futures. Others write about the future of animals, or aspects of Australian society. Others write about the importance of actions that show humanitarian and social justice concerns, combat discrimination, address climate change and advocate for human rights. When writing about the future there are strong sentiments of hope, but also of anxiety and fear. Young people are worried for themselves and others and often write with urgency about the need for change. In their writing we have found a variety of imagined futures, futures that reflect shifting social, political, ecological and technological imaginaries.



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Care Matters

Students are rightly concerned about and critical of actions that are taken without their input, and which will affect their futures. They care about the future life they and others will lead. Care is expressed as a relational concept, and students explore what care means, who should be cared about and the action of care. When exploring care entrants discuss issues including the treatment of women, the planet and the natural environment. They explore ideas of not caring, contemplate whether the Earth is cared for, or wonder why people don't care. Overall care and change are consistently related to a need for individual and collective change in both social and environmental arenas.

Many of the young writers critically reflect on the political sphere, thus showing an understanding of social and political issues. For instance, many entrants reject what they see as an oversimplification of issues, are concerned about the way many important issues in contemporary society are polarised, and question how individuals, communities and governments can take action. At all stages of the corpus, students are interested in actions that can create a better world. By years 11–12 students are reflecting more broadly on actions for change, and advocating for attitude change at an individual and social level. For example, entrants explore concepts of sustainability and sustainable futures and the need to educate others. Entrants express personal responsibility, arguing that they need to drive change so that they can enjoy a future with a cleaner, safer environment. Among senior school students many question the form and role of broader decision-making processes related to institutional responsibility such as policy and legislation, and the role that young people should play.

Context Matters

Young people are aware of the contexts in which they live and see relationships between their own internal world and external determinants. Young people are responding to things that are happening around them, they show interest in positive social networks such as family, community, friends, peers and their interpersonal dimensions are important. That said, events and forces that are happening on the global stage also interest them. Many express the view that their prosperity and wellbeing is linked to the human rights and equitable outcomes of others.

Across the corpus young people describe the way local, digital and natural systems are interconnected. The environment is a dominant theme and they are aware and knowledgeable about the difficulties that humans will face both locally and globally if issues of climate change, deforestation, pollution and use of non-renewable sources of energy are not addressed. Young people are writing about these issues in emotional, practical and political ways, often recognising the contexts that create solidarity around these issues. Young people want to learn more about contemporary issues and politics. They want more spaces and support to explore, debate and contribute to decisions on small and big challenges that their communities—and society—face. Yet they feel let down by the current system, including the media. Many question the ethics and quality of the information they receive and call for the provision of higher quality, reliable and accessible news media.



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“In their writing many young people demonstrate that they understand how contexts shape mental health outcomes ...”

While the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects were not as present in the corpus as we expected, entrants were concerned about lockdowns and their effects on schooling.

There was a strong theme relating to creating and maintaining positive relationships with families, friends and loved ones, which we interpret as reflecting the experiences of many students during lockdowns, when ways of maintaining interpersonal relationships were challenged yet were so significant to coping during the pandemic.

In their writing many young people demonstrate that they understand how contexts shape mental health outcomes and they make links between mental health issues and poverty, discrimination, use of social media, global conflict and climate change. Young people often write about other issues in relation to impacts on Mental Health and Health maintenance. They show concern for their own, their friends and other young people’s Mental Health. *What Matters?* authors write about the increase in mental health conditions and how in different contexts we need to address stigma and promote greater awareness, supports and advocacy.

Emotions Matter

Our analysis highlights the central importance of values and emotions to the emerging social and political identities and perspectives of young people. In addition to domain knowledge, young people’s essays highlight how the ways they feel about the places, people and issues they are concerned with inform their politics and the expectations they have of democracy. Affect is the way emotions move us. The *What Matters?* entries demonstrate how significant this is for young people—not because they are young, but because moral and political emotions are central to the way we experience, view and act on the world (Nussbaum, 2001; Pickard and Bessant, 2018; Montero and Bessant, 2019). *What Matters?* entries describe and reflect a range of emotions, from love, joy, pleasure, optimism and passion, to sadness, fear, worry, anger, desperation and grief. These emotions tell us about the deep ways in which young people relate to the interests, communities and concerns that they write about. The nuances of what young people write about and their ideas, contrary to common belief, do not reflect individual self-interest but more persistently engage with questions about the needs of others and collective responsibilities to provide for others and address the complex issues facing society.



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Conclusion

“... the earlier we start to nourish their interest in issues and knowledge about how healthy, diverse and inclusive democracies work the better.”

The Whitlam government recognised that young people, already bearing many adult responsibilities like military conscription, deserved the right to participate in the democratic process. The lowering of the voting age was part of a broader effort to make Australian democracy more inclusive and responsive. Lowering the voting age was a crucial step in recognising the political agency of young people and their role in shaping the nation’s future—a need that remains just as vital today.

The findings of this analysis of young people’s writing and reflections on their entries to the *What Matters? Writing Competition (2019–2023)* indicate that many young people have the political interest and understanding to enhance democracy and revitalise it in important and exciting ways through greater efforts to foster, and recognise, their participation. This analysis finds that many young people are knowledgeable and can form thoughtful and ethical opinions on what a good society is and how we should create it. They express a desire to play a significant role in building a caring and cared-for planet and have many ideas about how this can happen.

How we do this as a society matters. Having a sense of recognition, acceptance and belonging is crucial in the development of civic and political values, norms

and commitments. It is easier now than ever for such attachments to be fostered through the internet. Nefarious interests are at work in the world, and they are greatly enabled by technology to share political views and opinions—even ones that are false or misleading—with young people. What we do here in Australia to show young people that they are valued and that their rights to civic and political participation are respected right now—not in the future—matters more than ever.

Twentieth century views on how we educate and engage with young people in democracy are no longer ‘fit for purpose’ and the earlier we start to nourish their interest in issues and knowledge about how healthy, diverse and inclusive democracies work the better. This research finds that young people are interested in and open to change, to creativity and to taking big bold steps. Imagine what our democracy could be if we took on the challenges we face, together?

In the spirit of revitalising democracy through genuine engagement with young people we make the following recommendations for policy makers, educators, industry and young people to consider acting on. Indeed, acting on what young people say matters will contribute to generational renewal that will make for a stronger, fairer, healthier democracy and society—for us all.

Recommendations

- 1. Recognise the civic and political rights of young people in ways that expand democracy.** This should be supported by considering how agenda-setting, deliberation and decision-making of political parties, politicians, governments, policy-makers and educators can be extended to meaningfully engage with young people in ways they have reason to value and that reframe discourses of youth as valued and legitimate members of society. Young people also want their agency and efforts—including youth-led initiatives and activism—to be better recognised and supported.
- 2. Adopt an intergenerational approach to governance and policy making.** Young people are deeply concerned about the social and economic welfare of families, climate change, mental health and the role of digital media in society. They do not want to be pathologised or patronised. They want to contribute to efforts to address these issues through an intergenerational approach that promotes inclusion and equity.
- 3. Revamp civics education.** There is a significant need to meet young people's desire for more comprehensive, integrated and engaging civics education—including more content on, and critical engagement with, political institutions, organisations and processes. Civics education should be co-designed with students and it should consider how forms of intergenerational learning and exchange with teachers, carers and industry and political actors, including elected representatives, can strengthen the role and agency of young people in social and political life.
- 4. Encourage decisive action on climate change and environmental stewardship.** Environmental issues, particularly climate change, were central themes in the corpus. Young people demonstrated a strong and increasing commitment to sustainability and want to see more significant action on climate change and sustainability from individuals and institutions.
- 5. Promote social cohesion and conflict resolution.** Young people are concerned about increased polarisation and oversimplification of political issues and advocate for the need to be able to talk across differences of opinion. They also want to see the drivers of safe and respectful societies addressed, including affordable housing, meaningful work and pay, a sustainable environment and the reduction of interpersonal and state-based violence and discrimination.
- 6. Address inequality and discrimination.** The report repeatedly references young people's concern with gender equality, including the treatment of women and girls globally. Issues such as gender-based violence, the gender pay gap, and the need for respectful relationships are highlighted. Similarly, young people wrote about racism and discrimination, often linking these issues to broader social justice concerns such as class, and colonialism. Moreover, students want educational systems that promote equality and challenge harmful norms that perpetuate gendered, racialised and classed forms of discrimination and violence.
- 7. Support mental health care and tackle the causes of the causes of distress.** Mental health is a major concern with young people who write about the pressures they face, worry for the future and grapple with the negative impacts of social media. The level of concern for mental health reflects the urgent need for both greater support in the communities and contexts in which students live, such as schools. Their awareness of the drivers of poor mental health (climate change, economic inequality, violence and discrimination) clearly demonstrates the need for policy makers to focus on the macro level determinants of mental health.
- 8. Maximise the benefits of digital technologies and the media and address the potential harms.** Social media's role in shaping young people's mental health and political engagement was a recurrent theme. Young people write about both the positive and negative impacts of social media, demonstrating the need to better engage with social media in order to identify strategies to mitigate harm and realise the benefits. More broadly, the analysis shows the importance of digital literacy in helping students navigate online information critically. Young people also expressed concern with how they are represented in the media. The report indicates that inclusive and accurate representation is crucial for ensuring their voices are heard and respected. This is essential for informed and responsible civic participation.
- 9. Strengthen national and global youth networks.** The study notes that young people are concerned about international issues, particularly war, conflict and the plight of displaced peoples and refugees. Strengthening the connection of students to organisations and networks would support their engagement with international issues like climate change and human rights, which they are passionate about. The report acknowledges the role that young people play in peace and security, citing examples like the UN Security Council's Resolution 2250. Young people's involvement in organisations, social movements and campaigns for justice supports this recommendation.
- 10. Build back trust in institutions.** Young people want those in power, and the institutions and agencies that they preside over, to be more transparent, to communicate regularly and honestly with young citizens, and to show how they are taking immediate action in the present for a better future for all generations. Key areas where young people want greater accountability are government, the media and business; this is especially so where the reach and power of these actors has a clear role to play in addressing the complex problems of our time.

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WHAT MATTERS TO YOUNG AUSTRALIANS THROUGH TURBULENT TIMES?

INSIGHTS FROM THE 2019-2023 *WHAT MATTERS?* WRITING COMPETITION



Professor Philippa Collin, Dr Sky Hugman,
Dr Michael Hartup and Mr Ammar Randhawa

February 2025





About the Whitlam Institute

The Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University is a dynamic research and policy think tank, and a prime ministerial public museum. It commemorates and draws inspiration from the life and work of the Honourable Gough Whitlam AC QC and celebrates the contemporary relevance of his ideas. It pursues the causes he championed and is guided by the principles upon which Gough Whitlam's parliamentary career and years of service to the people of Australia were founded.

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About *What Matters?*

The *What Matters? Writing Competition* has been running since 2004 and has generated a rich archive of the views of young Australians. As a competition it is unparalleled in Australia, producing over 25 million words by young people on what matters to them. The competition began in NSW and expanded sequentially to the ACT, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and the NT. Now any young person who is enrolled in a year category in an Australian school is eligible to enter the competition of their own volition. Students can submit essays independently and many entries are created within a classroom setting. Teachers commonly use the competition as a writing exercise to help students plan, draft, use persuasive arguments and publish their writing. To enter the Whitlam Institute's *What Matters? Writing Competition*, students from years five to twelve submit an original written work up to 600 words in prose or poetry, of either fiction or non-fiction, that responds to the question: 'What Matters?'. This Report extends the previous Whitlam Institute analysis of the 2010-2018 *What Matters? Writing Competition* (Collin, P., and Hugman, S. (2020). *What Matters to Young Australians? Exploring young people's perspectives 2010-2018*. Whitlam Institute, Sydney).

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