

What role do non government organisations play in supporting mental health through social inclusion and participation and what more should they do?

The impact of working with the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) on the mental health and wellbeing in young people.

Based in Sydney, the MCA is Australia's leading museum dedicated to exhibiting, collecting and interpreting the work of living artists – in the belief that art is for everyone.

It is the MCA's vision to make contemporary art and ideas widely accessible to a range of audiences through the presentation of a diverse program of exhibitions and special events, both onsite and offsite.

GENEXT was created to enable young people to engage with creativity outside of school-based experiences.

In 2005, the MCA launched GENEXT, its flagship program by young people for young people. GENEXT is for young people aged 12 to 18, attracting almost 30,000 attendances since its first event. Taking place four to five times a year, it is an atmospheric festival-style 'museum-takeover' event delivered by young people, for young people, featuring live music, performances, art-making and interactive experiences entirely inspired by MCA exhibitions and contemporary artists.

The program takes place throughout the Museum, including the galleries, and offers the over 600 young people who attend at any one event, a safe parent- and teacher-free space to connect with ideas and each other for three hours, after hours, from 6 to 9pm on a Sunday evening.

Each GENEXT event is designed by the MCA Youth Committee with support from the Young Creatives Coordinator and Artist Educators.

The MCA Youth Committee is a small, diverse group of approximately 20-25 young people aged 13-18 who are recruited annually and act as a critical advisory body for the MCA on issues affecting young people.

The committee is also responsible for developing, promoting and delivering a range of programs and events for their peers, with a focus on GENEXT, in response to the MCA exhibition program and their own ideas and experiences.

A recently commissioned in-depth report documents key findings with past participants and stakeholders. This included interviews, focus groups, observations and a survey of 1,176 MCA visitors under the age of 32, and attempts to survey the impact of GENEXT, including their social and mental wellbeing.

Key findings are:

GENEXT is a safe space that welcomes young people from different backgrounds.

Overwhelmingly, survey respondents agree that GENEXT is a safe and supportive environment for young people. With few alcohol-free events just for teens and in the evening, GENEXT provides a rare opportunity for young people to simply be themselves. One person shared: 'it's so important that it's for under 18s because there are so few events that we feel welcome in, or that have a reputation for being safe.'

Another said:

'I have Cerebral Palsy, so as a young teenager, opportunities to socialise in an accessible, safe and fun environment are limited. With GENEXT I get the opportunity to do what most teenagers take for granted.'

Since 2017, the delivery of GENEXT Goes West, in partnership with institutions in Western and South Western Sydney, has helped engage even more young people from disadvantaged areas. Engaging young people from Western Sydney has been a goal of GENEXT since the program launched and formalising this off-site program in 2017 was part of the MCA's ongoing commitment to this outcome.

74% of past attendees say GENEXT helped them express their identity

It's the unique blend of contemporary art, live music, socialising and making, which has helped attract so many young people through the doors of the MCA, often for the first time. Away from school, teachers and parents, many attendees say GENEXT helps them to 'find themselves', with three quarters (74%) agreeing that GENEXT positively impacts their ability to express their identity.

From sexuality to ethnicity to the clothes they wear, GENEXT celebrates freedom of expression in a way that few feel they experience elsewhere. One person shared:

'it is an accepting safe space for different sexualities, religions and beliefs where young people can come to hang out and be happy within themselves and the person they are.'

70% feel that GENEXT has had a positive or very positive impact on their sense of belonging and connectedness, with many finding GENEXT strengthens old friendships and helps them make new ones.

GENEXT provides young people with a much-needed sense of belonging

70% feel that GENEXT has had a positive or very positive impact on their sense of belonging and connectedness. One participant shared how GENEXT fosters a feeling of connection, in a city and society that often feels disconnected:

'Feeling a part of something bigger than myself. 'Cause Sydney is so big I don't always feel so connected to everyone my age. [But GENEXT is] a social hub of likeminded people, like myself. Just being part of that.'

Another said how GENEXT gave them confidence in their future and helped them feel like they 'belong in society that will be soon governed by our own generation of youth'.

It appears that GENEXT can meet the needs of different people at different times in their life. For some, GENEXT has served as a place of support and escape during stressful times, such as during the Year 12 examinations, as well as a place for fun. One person shared:

'During periods of my life, GENEXT was a balm during periods of high stress, and still now is just so much fun. I probably wouldn't realise the necessity of at times letting go of control and just existing and recuperating.'

Visual art experiences can impact on youth mental health

Data from the 2018 Mission Australia's Youth Survey revealed that around two in five (43%) of young Australians aged 15-19 years old met the criteria for a possible serious mental illness.¹ That same report reveals that the percentage of young people who identify mental health as a concern or issue has doubled in the last three years alone. Yet many are unlikely to get treatment as just over half (51.7%) of all young people who indicated they had a problem for which they needed professional help do not seek assistance.²

Importantly, a growing body of evidence suggests that participation in the arts – including visual arts, singing, music, dance and drama – can create outcomes which support recovery for people with mental health issues, specifically enhancing connectedness and improving hope.³

Dr Elizabeth Scott, a Sydney-based psychiatrist specialising in mind plasticity, explains that networks foster resilience and therefore 'skills-based learnings in the creative arts can potentially improve brain plasticity and cognitive capacity.'

When asked about the unique power of visual art, Dr Scott said, 'Visual art is about ways of seeing and can be challenging on different levels: visually, cognitively, socially.' She explained that visual art experiences can foster the internal thinking process and help us to be imaginative and creative: 'It involves an inhibitive process, where you need to hold back rules about what to do... It teaches young people how to overcome the "I must, I should, I have to" dialogue.'

¹ Mission Australia. 2018. Youth Survey Report. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2S9QFVM>

² Vancic, L., Cairns, K., Shuttleworth, L., Welland, L., Fildes, J. and Nicholas, M. (2018). Lifting the weight: Understanding young people's mental health and service needs in regional and remote Australia. Sydney: ReachOut Australia and Mission Australia.

³ Stickley, T., Wright, N., Slade, M. (2017). The art of recovery: outcomes from participatory arts activities for people using mental health services. *Journal of Mental Health*. Vol. 27(4). pp. 367-373.

8 in 10 feel GENEXT positively impacts their wellbeing

Those who felt GENEXT had a very or extremely positive impact on their wellbeing referred to the way in which GENEXT enables freedom of expression. One explained: 'as someone who suffers from rather bad anxiety, I felt like I finally got to come out of my shell in a safe space', while another shared:

'This space allows an escape from certain pressures in teenage life, we can listen to music, socialise, make art and eat food which gives a distraction to problems such as mental health issues, parental/family problems and school related stress'.

However, there appears to be a link between positive wellbeing and frequency of attendance at GENEXT, with those who attend GENEXT six or more times being even more likely to experience positive impacts (90%). Survey respondents from the earlier years in the program frequently say things like, 'I wouldn't be where I am today without it'.

With GENEXT attendees more likely to participate in the arts, and experiencing positive impacts on their well-being, access to such programs must be a priority for the Australian art sector. Scholars have shown that youth-led learning arts opportunities and programs are effective for both learning about new art forms and can have a positive effect on self-confidence, self-esteem, relationship building and a sense of belonging.⁴ Such qualities have been associated with resilience and increased well-being.⁵

There is a role for the MCA to play in sharing its learnings with the visual arts museum sector more widely, and in particular the key success factors driving positive impacts.

This submission reproduces highlights from the Genext program report, prepared for the MCA by Jo Higgins (MCA); Tandi Palmer Williams, Brooke Boyce and Catherine Davis of research agency Patternmakers.

⁴ Hauseman DC 2016, 'Youth-led community arts hubs; Self-determined learning in and out of school time (OST) program', *Cogent Education*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1-11.

⁵⁵ Ennis G, Tonkins J 2015, 'Youth Arts and Mental Health: Exploring Connections in the TOP End', *The Research Centre for Health and Wellbeing*, Charles Darwin University, pp. 1-7; Hauseman DC 2016, 'Youth-led community arts hubs; Self-determined learning in and out of school time (OST) program', *Cogent Education*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1-11; Kemp M 2006, 'Promoting the health and wellbeing of young black men using community-based drama', *Health Education*, vol. 106, no. 3, pp. 186– 200; Grunstein R, Nutbeam D 2007, 'The impact of participation in the Rock Eisteddfod challenge on adolescent resiliency and health behaviours', *Health Education*, vol. 107, pp. 261–75; Wood L, Ivery P, Donovan R et al 2013, 'To the beat of a different drum': Improving the social and mental wellbeing of at-risk young people through drumming', *Journal of Public Health*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 70–9.