FUTURE PROOF 🦋

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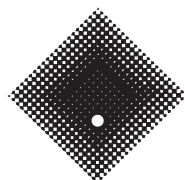## YOUNG PEOPLE, DISASTER RECOVERY AND (RE)BUILDING COMMUNITIES

Research Report

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Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin Nation who are the traditional owners of the University's land in Victoria.

We also acknowledge the original custodians of the lands of our Future Proof partners and recognise their connection to the lands, waters, and communities of this project.

We pay our respects to the Elders past and present of the multiple Traditional Owners of the land, including the Gunaikurnai, Taungurung, Wiradjuri, and Yorta Yorta Peoples.

Acknowledgement

Cover Artwork by Eli, He/They, North East Victoria, 16.

Contents

List of Tables

Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
ACCO	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation
LGA	Local Government Area
LLEN	Local Learning and Employment Network
NGO	Non-government organisation
Participant	Participant in the *Future Proof* project
VU	Victoria University (*Future Proof* Embedded Researcher)
YACVic	Youth Affairs Council Victoria (*Future Proof* Lead Partner)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive Summary

The Future Proof: Young People, Disaster Recovery and (Re)building Communities project ('Future Proof') was funded by the Federal Government following the Black Summer bushfires. The project emerged from the Youth Affairs Council Victoria ('YACVic') and Victoria University's Youth and Community Research Group's ('VU') work across bushfire-affected communities in 2020-2021. In this work, young people told us that they were restricted or excluded from their local communities' response following the bushfires.

In response, Future Proof drew on the expertise of YACVic and VU in youth participation, professional youth work principles and community development practices, alongside 12 regional and rural partners with expertise and knowledge of the needs of their communities. The aim of the place-based, collective impact partnership was to engage young people in bushfire-affected areas of Victoria and connect them with their local communities to promote youth participation and disaster resilience. Future Proof aimed to build skills and qualifications pathways and upskill young people in courses that would engage them across the various and diverse areas of emergency management. The project aimed to:

1. increase youth worker capacity;
2. promote engagement with local young people;
3. co-design and co-deliver local programs based on local needs and focused on disaster preparedness, response recovery and resilience; and
4. provide coordination and promote synergies between youth-focused activities delivered by local community organisations.

To enable the delivery of the youth-led activities, Future Proof partners employed youth workers and young peer workers, with internal management and administration support for each partner.

The aspirational project goal of 'youth participation' was also a key organising concept outlined early in the Future Proof project. It was conveyed as an important underpinning principle for the placed-based nature of the project and also for the project outcomes. Young people needed to be engaged, authentically involved, and have genuine voice and agency in the local design and delivery of the various components of the project deliverables.

This principle was informed by the following rationale: "Participation, and the inclusion of young people in decisions that affect them, is important to professional youth and community work practice."[1] Youth participation is about rights and citizenship, founded on the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*: Article 12, which declares that "children and young people have the right to participate in decisions being made about them."[v] Participation improves outcomes: if you involve young people in decision-making processes it makes things better.[2] As such, the following overarching question informed VU's role and practice as embedded researchers: What does youth participation look like in the Future Proof project?

VU was the embedded research partner in the Future Proof project. VU's role included relationship building, methodological scoping, ethics approvals, data collection, analysis, presentations, and publications. VU also engaged with the partners to actively involve them in the research process and an iterative process of feedback with partners to ensure validation of the high-level themes that emerged from the research.

In this research report we report on findings from the youth-focused practices and roles in Future Proof, from the youth participation principles and practices that were adopted by the partners, to the youth advisory groups established by the partners and youth peer workers who were employed by the partners. The increased youth capacity in the partner organisations was identified as a major contributor to the success of Future Proof.

More detailed findings of the impact of youth participation include:

- the increased capacity of partner organisations to connect with young people in communities;

- building connections between emergency management teams and organisations with young people;

- the promotion of youth participation and the empowerment of young people;

- the establishment of youth advisory groups in a paid capacity saw 183 young people, aged 12-25 years, actively engaged across the partners; and

- youth peer workers played a significant role in the success of Future Proof, with most having a positive impact on the partner organisations both internally and in the broader community.

As a place-based collective impact project, Future Proof brought together 14 partners in formal and informal ways. There were a number of challenges reported by partners, including limited time to scope and plan the project before implementation, as well as a perceived lack of input from regional and rural expertise in the co-design. Regional and rural partners were also conscious of the different bushfire experiences of their communities. A number of partners identified Future Proof as a unique opportunity to trial different approaches with young people in their communities.

Enabling young people in regional and rural Victoria to access training and qualifications was a key aim of the Future Proof project. The partners overcame availability and accessibility barriers relating to training and qualifications and exceeded the expectations of the Future Proof project. For example, 172 young people enrolled in certificate or diploma level qualifications over the life of the project. A further 109 completed their training qualifications, with a further 162 currently finishing their training. Other courses were undertaken across youth work, public safety, and emergency management. A total of 1598 young people participated in 76 different trainings and workshops. Some young people took the opportunity to undertake multiple courses and training.

A key finding from the Future Proof project was the importance of 'time' in regional and rural areas. Partners agreed that additional time for recruitment and staff development should be built into future projects.

Including VU as an embedded research partner in Future Proof enabled evidence of the ambitious and extensive project to be captured across the three years of the project. It also enabled the upskilling of partner organisations to participate in all aspects of research, including research design in their local communities, abstract submission, conference dissemination, and publication in national and international journals.

Overall, Future Proof more than achieved its training and qualification goals with young people. Importantly, it demonstrated how building expertise and networks with young people offers a constructive way to achieve real and locally relevant outcomes in communities following a disaster(s).

Future Proof has provided valuable new knowledge and insights into how to actively involve young people in disaster recovery and demonstrated how youth participation, professional youth work principles, and community development practices can be utilised to achieve this goal.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Background and Context

Black Summer bushfires: young people's experience

Young people in regional and rural Victoria were impacted heavily by the 2019-20 bushfires that burnt an estimated 24.3 million hectares across many parts of Australia. The bushfires have been described as one of the most intense and catastrophic bushfire seasons in Australia. The sheer size and multiple locations required reinforcements to be called in from all over Australia and internationally. Communities were heavily impacted, with many isolated or cut off, and residents were unable to return following evacuations because basic services, including water, power, and communications were disrupted.[3]

Despite the call for additional resources to fight the fires and provide incident response and recovery, the experience of many young people was one of exclusion. While trained emergency services personnel are required for the immediate containment and suppression efforts, the affected communities move quickly into response and recovery to protect and support local communities. Following the fires, young people told us that they were restricted or excluded from taking any role in their communities following the bushfires.[4] This included restricting young people's access to local services in their own communities to aid in response, recovery, and rebuilding.

Young people's experience following the 2019-2020 bushfires mirrored national and global restrictions on young people's involvement in disasters around the world. A prevailing and deeply embedded vulnerability and risk discourse around children and young people in disasters and the emergency management sector restricts the active involvement of young people. While the call to actively involve children and young

people under the age of 30[i] is gaining traction, the vulnerability discourse is deeply entrenched.[5]

Future Proof: young people, disaster recovery and (re)building communities

The Future Proof: Young People, Disaster Recovery and (Re)building Communities project ('Future Proof') emerged from the Youth Affairs Council Victoria ('YACVic') and Victoria University's Youth and Community Research Group's ('VU') work across Victoria's bushfire- affected communities in 2020-21. The project drew on the expertise of YACVic and VU in youth participation, professional youth work principles, and community development practices. The project aimed to reduce the incidence and impact of exclusion from disaster recovery and rebuilding for young people in regional and rural Victoria by engaging with young people and connecting them with their local communities. The project aimed to build skills and qualification pathways for young people in emergency management and community services and upskill them in courses that would enable them to engage across the various and diverse areas of emergency management, including first aid and communications.

The place-based project brought together 14 partners (see Appendix A for details). There were 12 partners based in regional and rural Victoria and two in Melbourne: the lead partner, YACVic and the embedded research partner, VU. Alongside YACVic and VU, the two Local Learning and Employment Network partners did not have their own local place or community to engage with young people. Their role in the project was to support the eight Local Government Areas ('LGA') and two Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations ('ACCO') to achieve training and qualification targets. In this way, the project aimed to provide much- needed support in the eight LGAs and two ACCOs to:

1. increase youth worker capacity;

2. engage with local young people;

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[i] The age boundaries of children and young people are defined by the underlying principles of the research/activity. Future Proof adopted the Youth Affairs Council Victoria YACVic's, definition of young people as 12-24 year-olds. We have adopted the same definition for this research report.

3. co-design and co-deliver local programs based on local need and focused on disaster preparedness, response recovery, and resilience; and

4. provide coordination and promote synergies between youth-focused activities delivered by local community organisations.

To enable the delivery of youth-led activities, the partners employed youth workers and young peer workers, with some internal management and administration support for each partner. VU employed three researchers across the project (Two x Lead Chief Investigators and one x Research Fellow). As the lead partner, YACVic employed Future Proof specific staff who reported to the Rural Manager, and brought in organisational staff who assisted with training, administration and finance, communication and media promotion.

The aspirational project goal of 'youth participation' was also a key organising concept outlined early in the Future Proof project. It was conveyed as an important underpinning principle for the placed-based nature of the project and also for the project outcomes. Young people needed to be engaged, authentically involved, and have genuine voice and agency in the local design and delivery of the various components of the project deliverables. This principle was informed by the following rationale: "Participation, and the inclusion of young people in decisions that affect them, is important to professional youth and community work practice."[6] Youth participation is about rights and citizenship founded on the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*: Article 12, which declares that "children and young people have the right to participate in decisions being made about them." Participation improves outcomes: if you involve young people in decision making processes it makes things better.[7] As such, the following overarching question informed VU's role and practice as embedded researchers: What does youth participation look like in the Future Proof project?

Community-based research

Community-based research (CBR) is a way of doing research, or a 'research paradigm'. The Centre for Social Justice and Community Action describes a research paradigm as "a set of underlying assumptions about the world and how it should be studied".[8] CBR is collaborative, involving people (participants) from a particular community or group who share important things in common, often working together with academics and professional researchers on a shared goal. CBR is sometimes

described as 'place-based research' because its focus is located in a particular place; a physical, geographic space, or a location, such as a neighbourhood, town or community.[9]

Research is generally defined as the process of creating or discovering new knowledge. CBR is also concerned with new knowledge but focuses on the needs, issues or problems that are important to a particular community, and works towards solutions, outcomes, and actions that benefit the participants and their community. Some of the research or data collection may be done by the participants themselves, and analysis of data and findings are fed back to participants for their confirmation and validation.[10]

CBR doesn't make a distinction between those who undertake the research and those who are researched. In a nutshell, community-based research is academics and professional researchers working *with* and not *on* a community or group of people in a shared research endeavour towards positive outcomes.[11]

The Future Proof project is a placed-based community, collective impact project with an embedded research partner (VU). McGinity and Salokangas define embedded research as "a mutually beneficial relationship between academics and non-academic host organisations … with the purpose of identifying and implementing a collaborative research agenda."[12] In this research, VU has drawn on the academic literature from the methods and methodologies associated with CBR. In addition, VU has drawn on the literature underpinning the Embedded Research and Researcher-in-Residence models to inform their partner researcher role and relationships with the lead agency, project partners, and participants in the Future Proof project.

Victoria University: the embedded researcher

Victoria University's Youth and Community Research Group (VU) was invited to be the embedded research partner in Future Proof as a result of our international expertise in youth participation and youth work,[13] and our previous research with young people following the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires.[14] Based in the western suburbs of Melbourne, VU is a world-class teaching and research institution that is committed to conducting life-changing research that positively impacts the wellbeing of people, place, and planet.

The VU team engaged with partners *in situ* wherever possible. The aim was to capture knowledge from Future Proof partners in their own communities and to enable the research team to capture evidence from the project that enabled academic and community-focused ways of knowing and understanding to dialogue together and "create new understandings".[15]

Embedding research in projects can be understood as a process of creating new knowledge that is "produced when academic and [community] organisational ways of knowing are brought into dialogue with one another to create new understandings."[16] Researchers undertaking embedded research in organisations embody the following key tenets:[17]

- knowledge and expertise that researchers bring with them;
- research-based knowledge that they broker into the organisation;
- new insights developed from gathering and interpreting data in situ;
- negotiation of expertise and the contextualising of external knowledge; and
- co-production of new understandings.

In addition to new ways of understanding, it has been argued that embedding academic researchers into a non-academic project helps with challenges that emerge.[18] As an ambitious project, working across 14 organisations, with 30-40 direct employees and multiple managerial and organisational support roles, challenges and opportunities occurred.

In addition to traditional research, as the embedded research partner VU was able to both respond to and create opportunities for:

1. building trusted relationships with partners;

2. providing academic expertise and upskilling of participants through formal and informal training;

3. being a trusted sounding-board and providing feedback loops;

4. facilitating reflective practice;

5. up-skilling partners and organisations to conduct research; and

6. changing the way partners perceived research, researchers and/or the role of universities in community work.

This research report is the culmination of three years of research across the Future Proof project. The *Future Proof* report presents findings from the data that focus on key aspects of the Future Proof project. This includes the central concept of 'youth participation', the establishment of the 'youth advisory groups', and the role of 'youth peer workers'. We provide an analysis of the numbers and types of qualifications and courses undertaken by young people across the partners, youth-led activities and events, and the training delivered. We also provide our findings on the presence of the 'five pillars of collective impact' as evident across the Future Proof project.

LITERATURE REVIEW
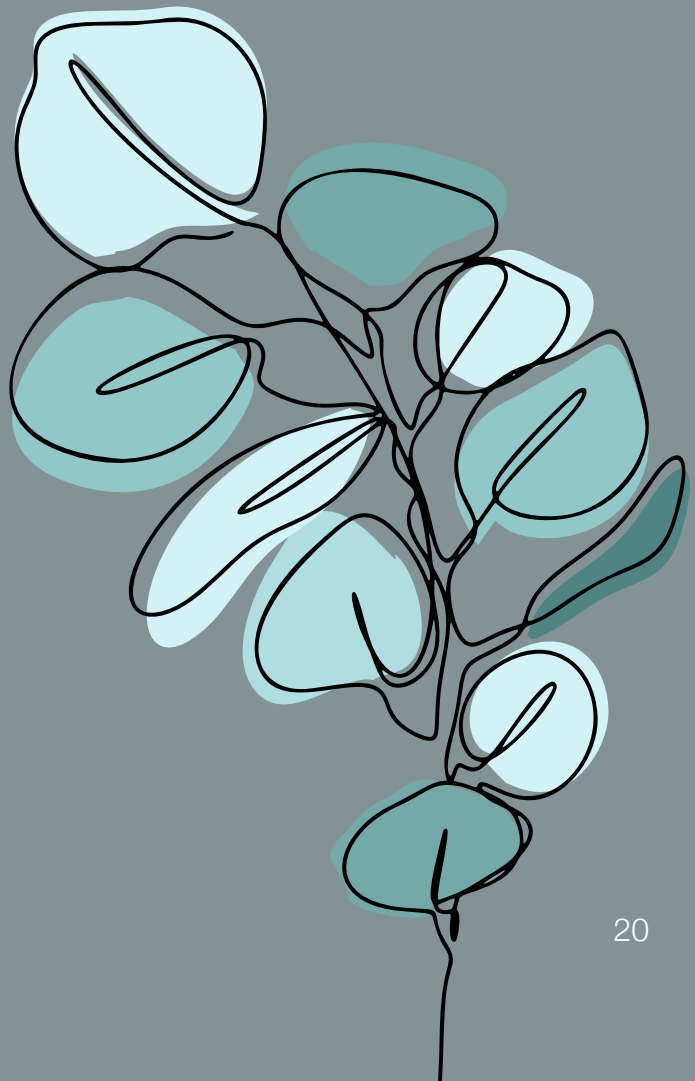
Literature Review

Youth participation

In the Future Proof project, 'youth participation' was an underpinning principle as the aspirational goal of involving young people. Specifically, youth participation is about the rights and citizenship of young people.[19]

To participate is to be 'actively involved'. Regarding young people's active participation, it means that they have the right to participate in decisions being made about them, and recognises that they have expertise and opinions regarding their own lives and the wider community that are valuable and useful. In this sense involving young people in community decision making is their right as members of the community, but their involvement also brings different perspectives that add value to other voices and as such improves decision making.

The United Nations states clearly that participation is a fundamental human right, enshrined in *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and for young people this is reiterated in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. According to UNICEF, participation enables young people to "play a vital role in their own development as well as in that of their communities, helping them to learn vital life-skills, develop knowledge on human rights and citizenship and to promote positive civic action."[20]

Young people under the legal age of enfranchisement and majority (18 years) are often excluded from community decision making based on the false assumption that young people lack the knowledge, experience or capability to be involved in decision making. However, the UN recognises young people as "key agents for social change, economic growth and technological innovation."[21]

The Victorian Government also recognise the importance of youth participation and have recommended 11 useful principles for safe and meaningful participation of children and young people:[22]

1. Children and young people have human rights, including the right to make decisions and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

2. Hearing and acting on the voices of children and young people is essential to their safety and for the quality and safety of services.

3. Children and young people have experience and expertise to share.

4. Seeking, listening to and acting on the voices of children and young people is part of everyone's role.

5. The voices of children and young people are diverse. All children and young people are valued and respected, and their differences appreciated.

6. The voices of children and young people lead to positive action.

7. Children and young people know how they can participate and are engaged in ways that make sense to them.

8. Participation promotes a strong voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

9. Children and young people are informed and understand what it means to participate and how their participation will link to outcomes.

10. Child and youth participation is ethical, accessible, inclusive, safe and culturally, linguistically and religiously appropriate.

11. Participation is sought from children and young people with lived experience of disadvantage.

The Victorian youth sector has developed a Code of Ethical Practice[23] for working with young people to enable their participation, which includes the following principles that reflect values that inform youth work:

- **Empowerment.** The Code acknowledges that young people under the age of 18 lack power because of their age. The Code advocates for and promotes the

voices, experiences and agency of young people. It supports young people to achieve their rights and best interests.

- **Participation.** The Code promotes opportunities for young people to take part in decisions that affect them.

- **Social justice.** The Code highlights the role of youth workers as social justice educators and advocates. It prioritises young people's human rights, equity, participation, diversity, and justice.

- **Climate justice.** The Code promotes care for and connection with the environment that youth workers and young people live and work in. This includes waterways, air, land, and ecosystems.

- **Respect for human dignity and worth.** The Code advocates respect for young people's dignity and worth and their right to make their own choices.

- **Respect for diversity.** The Code respects the intersecting identities, cultures, abilities, and backgrounds of young people.

- **Connectedness to friends, family, community and culture.** The Code highlights the importance of social and cultural connection for young people. This helps build their sense of belonging, identity, independence, and wellbeing.

- **Positive health and wellbeing.** The Code highlights the importance of supporting young people's abilities to assist them to thrive. It does this through caring for their physical, mental, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual wellbeing.

- **Safety.** The Code prioritises creating environments that are physically, psychologically, and culturally safe. Cultural safety is particularly important for young people with specific religious and spiritual connections and beliefs.

The above principles and values informed this project's definition of youth participation. For the VU Youth and Community Research Group, youth participation is about enabling young people as active citizens; involving young people in a range of activities, organisations, government, and community structures; and ultimately in decision making on issues that directly affect them.[24]

Youth participation in disasters

While children and young people are disproportionately affected by disaster, they are stakeholders in disaster risk reduction practices and an integral part of any "people-centred preventive approach to disaster risk."[25] Yet, traditionally they have been managed under a vulnerability and risk discourse in disaster response and planning.[26] More recently, the call to involve young people in disaster risk reduction planning and response has seen a shift towards a strengths-based approach with young people and disasters. Acknowledging young people's strengths and capabilities enables the active involvement of young people in disaster management and shifts the vulnerability discourse. The active involvement of young people in disasters is reflected in a range of language and approaches that includes concepts such as engagement, empowerment, meaningful participation, and active citizenship – i.e. current and future citizens, youth voices, and youth participation, as described above.

Youth participation in disaster management has largely been used as a broad concept without definition within the specific context of disasters. While much is understood about the trauma and psychological impact of disasters on young people, taking a youth participation, strengths-based approach requires new ways of thinking about the role of young people in disaster management.

There is emerging evidence of new understandings around young people in disasters.[27] To date, Australian researchers and disaster practitioners have reported on a child-focused disaster preparedness program to assess community perspectives of their preparedness skills.[28] There is evidence of the vital role of adults in providing young people with a seat at the table, facilitating inclusion and ensuring voices are heard,[29] and we have shared findings around acts of citizenship and how the Sendai Framework[30] has influenced the inclusion of young people.[31] Internationally, there is increasing evidence of young people's active involvement in disasters that is building new knowledge of youth participation. [32,32a]

This report aims to build on this emerging knowledge by sharing findings from the Future Proof project and demonstrating new ways of understanding youth participation in a disaster context.

Embedded researcher

Embedded research often involves locating the academic researchers within the physical or geographic location of the community, organisation or project. Working alongside or with non-academics, this may be described as being 'in-residence'.[33,33a]

The Researcher-in-Residence model of embedded research has been well documented and is described by El-Hoss et al. as an innovative way of undertaking research in the community and welfare sectors that "typically involves an organization hosting a researcher affiliated to an academic institution"[34,34a] and provides the embedded researcher with "unique, privileged access to observe negotiations between staff/volunteers and decision makers in real time and view the mechanisms behind strategic change".

Embedded research in a community organisation or project can be complex and non-linear, often involving working with multiple participant groups and competing values, priorities, needs and expectations. This may often be confusing and lead to frustrations for both researchers and organisations. As such Ward et al. conclude that much of the literature on researchers being embedded in organisations "highlights the importance of agreeing and communicating the intentions, structure and processes of embedded research early and clearly."[35]

METHODOLOGY

Methodology

The VU research team conducted research across the three years of the Future Proof project, investigating the implementation of the project, assessing the aims and outcomes of the project, investigating the provision of targeted training, upskilling and qualification pathways for young people, and local events and activities that engaged and connected young people in the partner communities. The research investigated the partner's engagement activities and events with young people to be better prepared to actively engage in and lead disaster management through bushfire recovery and planning in their local communities.

The research investigated the role of youth participation, youth-focused engagement in community, empowerment, and capacity building. As outlined previously, the research question 'What does youth participation look like in the Future Proof project?' was central to the analysis. In addition, the researchers considered the range of accredited training and qualifications delivered through Future Proof and the relevance of these to bushfire recovery and preparedness for future events.

Ethical research and informed consent

Ethical research and child safe practices with young people was undertaken by the VU research team. Ethical approval was obtained from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee, under ethics application numbers HRE22-134 and HRE22-174. The Code of Ethical Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector,[36] based on human rights, was practiced by all partners.

All participants were briefed about the nature of the research and provided informed consent to participate according to the University's ethical consent guidelines (HRE22-134). Data protection procedures were followed, and the data was anonymised to protect participants' identities.

Mixed methods

The VU research team adopted a mixed-methods approach to the extensive data collected across the three years of the Future Proof project and the various aspects, outcomes, and impacts of the Future Proof project. Data was captured from workshops, focus groups, interviews, and observations, along with quantitative data collected on training and qualification numbers. Data was collected at the Community of Practice events[ii], face to face in partners locations, and online via Zoom or Teams. Data collected across the project also worked to inform the research questions posed to partners at different stages of the project.

Wherever possible the research team incorporated iterative feedback loops, sharing our analysis of data with partners and providing the opportunity for them to validate and/or revise at subsequent events to ensure we adequately represented the data collected. This approach enhanced our role as embedded researcher, working together on the co-production of knowledge with our partners and having an insider perspective of the project. The approach and our relationship with partners shaped the research undertaken across the project and informed the way the lead organisation YACVic responded to challenges the partners faced throughout the project.

Research questions

Our embedded research focus informed our interviews and focus group questions and dialogue, with questions to interviewees such as:

- How are you promoting youth participation?

- How are you involving young people?

- How are you activating and elevating young people's voices?

- What has worked? Why?

- What opportunities have been taken up in your community through Future Proof?

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ii Community of Practice events were held every 3-4 months in regional partner locations, bringing the *Future Proof* partners together in a 3-day face to face event.

- What hasn't worked? Why?

- How might you do this differently in the future?

- How can others do what you did to make the youth teams work?

- What is the legacy of Future Proof?

- What do you see as the opportunities that have been taken up? What are the opportunities that have not come to fruition?

- What do you see being the connections within your organisation and opportunities within your organisation?

- What do you think the impact was on young people in your Shire/Council/organisation of being involved in Future Proof?

- What value has the extra year offered you and your organisations?

- What happens next as Future Proof projects wrap up?

- What lessons have you learnt?

Data collection

VU collected and analysed data from interviews and focus groups with peer workers, youth workers, and managers.

Data collection method	Participants	Conducted at
Observations and participation in community of practice meetings	Youth workers, youth peer workers, managers, Lead Organisation and VU research team Future Proof staff	Community of Practice Workshops across regional Victoria
Observations and participation in partner meetings		Regional meetings, youth worker meetings, peer worker meetings, manager meetings, YACVic meetings

Focus groups	Peer workers	Face to face at Community of Practice Workshops across regional Victoria
	Youth workers	Face to face at Community of Practice Workshops across regional Victoria
	Managers	Face to face at Community of Practice Workshops across regional Victoria
	YACVic	Face to face at Community of Practice Workshops across regional Victoria
Post-session feedback surveys	Peer workers and youth workers	Face to face at Community of Practice Workshops across regional Victoria
Mid-project interviews	Partners (peer workers, youth workers and managers)	Online via Zoom and/or Microsoft Teams
End-of-project interviews	Partners (peer workers, youth workers and managers)	Online via Zoom and/or Microsoft Teams
Interviews (independent evaluation)		Face to face at Community of Practice Workshops across regional Victoria

Partner reporting data	Numbers of training and pathway qualifications. Numbers of youth-led/focused events and activities; case studies of young people's achievements	Collected from quarterly reports submitted to Lead Partner

Table 1: Data collection methods

Thematic analysis of data

Qualitative research approaches enable the interpretation of data in order for the findings to be put to use as new knowledge in the world of applied practice.[37] Thematic analysis was used by the VU researchers as a method of "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data."[38] It has been suggested that "in general, analysis of qualitative data can be outlined in five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding".[39] Furthermore, "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set."[40]

The thematic analysis of the data in this research was conducted using a 'dualistic approach' of both deductive and inductive techniques.[41] This combined approach to analysis enabled the inductive capture of naturally emerging themes from the data as well as themes that align with the research questions and theoretical lens of the researchers. As such the thematic analysis of the data determined patterns and repetitions in the participants' responses and are described in the analysis as the 'themes and sub-themes' in the presentation of results and discussion below. The iterative feedback loops used by the VU research team were central to the analysis, enabling both formal and informal feedback to and from partners, and seeking validation on the high-level themes at the Community of Practice Workshops.

Independent evaluation of the Embedded Research Partner

In order to understand and evaluate VU's role as the Future Proof project's imbedded research partner, VU engaged an independent academic researcher to evaluate VU's role, and to examine the value of the embedded research process and outcomes. The independent evaluation was conducted via face-to-face interviews with representatives of the project participants (youth workers, peer workers, managers and YACVic), with the independent evaluator asking the six representative participants to reflect and dialogue on the following questions:

- What was the scope of VU's involvement?

- What has been the usefulness/benefit of the VU research team in the project?

- What would you (partners) have liked from VU?

- Did the involvement of VU as embedded researcher change your perspective of research?

The interviews were audio recorded, and the data was thematically analysed and reported and has been included in this report.

RESULTS AND LESSONS

Results and Lessons

Youth participation and Youth Advisory Groups

In line with Future Proof's priority of promoting youth participation, partner organisations recruited, supported and paid young people as Youth Advisory Group members in each organisation. Over the life of the project, 183 young people were members of their community's Youth Advisory Group. The broader prioritisation of youth participation in disaster resilience enabled partners to develop relationships with young people in their communities, build connections between young people and Emergency Management organisations, and advocate with and for young people's active citizenship and youth voice in their communities.

Mini-literature review

This report commenced with a review of literature relating to youth participation as a concept, and youth participation in the disaster context. There is also an existing body of knowledge specifically relating to youth advisory structures.

- **Connection to young people's rights:** Youth advisory structures can facilitate young people's right to have their voices heard and to influence decisions that affect their lives.[42] To enjoy this right, young people in such groups need to be provided with "necessary information about options that exist and the consequences of such options so that they can make informed and free decisions."[43]

- **Benefits of youth advisory structures:** The importance of creating structures to enable young people's perspectives and advise for services and organisations working with young people is well documented.44 These structures provide benefits for young people in terms of developing their leadership and professional skills, their confidence, their sense of belonging in their communities and may result in youth-driven change.45 These structures also provide benefits for organisations, including enhancing service/program design, improving engagement with young people, and platforming youth leadership.46 With this in mind, youth advisory structures should be designed to promote participation from a diverse range of young people.

- **Youth advisory structures – models and approaches:** There are a range of different models and methodological approaches relating to youth voice in organisations.47,47a The structure employed should be informed by the desires of young people in the organisation/community, however it is frequently determined (and limited) by organisational resource constraints.48 Recent evidence confirms that young people in youth advisory structures want their engagement to be authentic and want the organisations they work with to "embrace youth leadership", "listen to youth experience", and "act on youth recommendations".49 It is important, however, to recognise that some "highly structured" youth advisory structures may marginalise "vast numbers of young people."50

- **Youth advisory structures in disaster recovery:** Previous research with young people in regional and rural Victoria whose communities had been impacted by the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires recommended that youth-focused, disaster management and community-focused organisations engage with young people across the disaster lifecycle.51 Youth advisory structures may provide a formal mechanism to enable these organisations to engage with young people in their communities to inform and improve disaster recovery initiatives.

Results

a. Enabled additional youth-focused capacity in organisations

Participants identified the additional youth-focused capacity in their organisations as a major contributor to the success of the Future Proof project. The funding for

additional staffing in youth-focused roles in organisations was described as a key motivator for partners joining the project. Over the life of the project, 106 staff were employed to work with young people in local communities in the context of place-based disaster resilience. Partners reported the investment in youth workers in communities facilitated expertise to both engage directly with young people and support organisations to improve their engagement with young people.

> *"It's the change management piece. It's not hard to get a young person involved but then to get that organisation to actually wrap around that young person, recognise the differing needs ... [for] our services to actually prioritise young people." (Manager)*

> *"I really value that YACVic saw an opportunity to attract funding to put more youth workers on the ground." (Manager)*

> *"It's an incredible opportunity for our organisation but also for our community. I absolutely would do it again." (Manager)*

b. Enabled organisations' connections with young people in communities

Participants reported that the Future Proof project enabled their organisations (councils, NGOs, ACCOs and LLENs) to connect with young people in their communities. The youth-focused staff funded through Future Proof were able to build trusted relationships with young people in communities. Through these connections, partners were able to facilitate connections with their organisation, local service providers and the community generally, and to advocate for young people's participation. Over the life of the project, Future Proof partners organised 292 local events, which 16,831 young people attended.[iii]

[iii] Owing to difficulties calculating young people's attendance at events and activities for the broader community, we have reported 16,831 young people in attendance at events and excluded events

> *"If there's anything that's come out of this project, it's the connections that we've had with young people. …what's worked with this project and the youth participation part, is that those young people have somewhere to go, and confide in, which is lovely." (Peer worker)*

> *"The perspective we gained within the community to see what needs aren't met that we can meet, that we can advocate for, is astounding." (Youth worker)*

> *"From our perspective, I think as a really lean organisation, it's given us capacity to properly engage with young people and not just brush over the surface." (Manager)*

> *"I think we managed to access parts of the population with the Future Proof funding that generally [are thought of] last within our community." (Peer worker)*

> *"This is preparing our community, our young people and bringing our young people into the community." (Manager)*

c. Building connections between EM teams, organisations and young people in communities to strengthen disaster preparedness and resilience

Participants reported that the Future Proof project enabled them to build connections between young people and local organisations in the context of disaster preparedness and resilience, and promoted young people's voices inside organisations. Participants also reported that the project strengthened the

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where reported figures did not distinguish between young people and the broader community in attendance. As a result, this is a conservative figure. Overall, 37,331 people attended locally organised events in their communities through Future Proof.

capacity of local emergency management teams to build connections with youth teams in their organisations and young people in communities. Partners reported that this would strengthen disaster preparedness and resilience into the future.

> *"[Our youth worker in the future] will be … straddling our emergency management resilience and our community development team and really building community with a focus on young people's resilience for future disasters."*
> *(Manager)*

> *"I think just being able to have conversations with young people about the role that they can play in [disaster] preparedness within their own home. ...they're leaving the conversations going 'I can talk to Mum and Dad about what we're going to do. What is our fire plan?', for example. I think those conversations have been really powerful." (Youth worker)*

> *"But even having young people feeling that they can approach me potentially more than some of my colleagues, just because I'm in that closer age bracket. I speak their language. We've got the connection already built in, so it's just like an extra bridge between council, not just youth team, but all of council and those young people." (Peer worker)*

> *"It's so good for council to have that representative capturing voices that perhaps are not the ones that are always heard, or the ones that approach council to make themselves heard and share their opinions." (Youth worker)*

d. Promoted youth voice in organisations beyond Future Proof work

Participants reported that the Future Proof project enabled youth participation outside of the traditional council consultation processes, which do not work for many young people. The impact was broader than the project's disaster resilience focus, with some partners reporting that Future Proof enabled their organisations

to recognise the ways in which young people's voices could be promoted throughout councils more broadly.

> *"It's also put a spotlight for us on a lot of other programs and how we're actually recognising youth voice … it actually has been able to put that spotlight on for us which I think is really helpful." (Manager)*

> *"We've been able to establish a Youth Advisory Group. We've been able to put those young people in front of councillors as well as hearing their voices on a regular basis. So, that's probably been the biggest benefit to our organisation, to our communities." (Manager)*

e. Youth Advisory Group empowered young people to organise, build relationships with others and advocate with, and for, each other

Participants reported the manner in which the local Youth Advisory Groups were funded through Future Proof enabled youth workers and peer workers in partner organisations to build connections between young people in their regions. This can be a challenging task in communities where there is significant physical distance and limited transport options between towns. Participants reported the strong engagement of young people in the advisory groups, their ownership of the group, and their advocacy for one another and other young people in their communities.

> *"Most of the young people have stuck around, they're really passionate and they're really engaged about it and they can see the issues and they want to enact change … they're really loud and proud about it." (Youth worker)*

> *"One of the biggest opportunities I think for us was the establishment and continuation of a Youth Advisory Group. It has been a really good experience and we wish that we can continue in the future. It's a bit of a legacy of the project of how we interacted with the young people, how engaged they were." (Youth worker)*

> *"They want to know how other youth groups have worked elsewhere in the country. They want to see how advocacy groups in Melbourne have established themselves and managed as a group of generally teenagers to still create action within the community and they're excited … they also have that mentality that they know what they are fighting for is worth the fight." (Peer worker)*

> *"[The YAG] said how the program that was so impactful because they were working with other young people, as well as adult mentors. Just having one or the other would not have had the same impact. That wasn't just a peer worker but having the different ages in the group as well. A lot of our group go to the same school, but they never had interacted at school. Now, they're hanging out together on the weekends and doing stuff. Having those different ages in the community for them to go to as well has being really important." (Youth worker)*

> *"When we had our first meeting [of our Youth Advisory Group], they didn't know each other … and you look at them now and they're literally best friends from every part of the [local Government area] and it's really lovely, really, really lovely, this support. In a council meeting when a councillor says something kind of average to another young person, someone from across the table would be like, "Uh-uh." They're super supportive of each other and it's really cool to see them stand up for the other person in a situation that they're probably - they're talking to someone higher and they're still willing to support that person." (Youth worker)*

f. Formal, focused program, paid Youth Advisory Group was effective

Over the life of the Future Proof project, 183 young people were members of their council/organisation's Youth Advisory Group.

Demographics of Youth Advisory Group members (n = 183)	
Age	
12-15 years	55%
16-19 years	38%
20-25 years	7%
Gender	
Female	56%
Male	36%
Non-binary or gender diverse	8%
Education	
Currently in secondary school	88%
Currently in university/TAFE/undertaking apprenticeship/traineeship	5%
Not currently engaged in education	8%
Diverse lived-experiences	
Rurally isolated	68%
Lived experience of disaster	44%
LGBTIQA+	15%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	14%
Low socioeconomic status	13%
Disability	10%
Culturally and linguistically diverse	6%
Recently arrived refugee	2%

Participants reported the effectiveness of Youth Advisory Groups through their establishment as formal groups with an explicit focus. Participants also reported that ensuring members were paid for their time was important in both recognising the expertise of young people and valuing their contributions. Furthermore, participants reported that paying members of the Youth Advisory Group enabled a diverse range of young people to participate.

> *"When I think about youth participation, there's three Ps: purpose, pizza and payment. And both – all three of those things easily come from having a formed group. Our Youth Advisory Group is far more effective, far more involved and far more enthusiastic, when they feel like they've got a purpose." (Peer worker)*

> *"I think also having finances specifically for awarding young people provides a level of legitimacy within our organisation but also our expectations of the young people when they are doing things." (Manager)*

> *"We had never considered, for example, paying young people before … that they should be paid for their advice as experts in their lived experience. I think that has contributed to the continuation of some of them being able to put funding into transport and picking them up, providing a meal for every meeting. There was a fair bit of backbone and structure and resources for us to really develop a really good relationship with them to understand their lives, to see how we could support them, and I think that they took that opportunity. We had capacity for them, and they responded in a magnificent way, I think." (Manager)*

Youth Peer Workers

In line with Future Proof's priority of promoting youth participation, each partner organisation was funded to employ full-time at least one young person with lived-experience of disaster(s) as a peer worker. Over the life of the project, 27 young people were employed as youth peer workers in youth teams (or equivalent) in partner organisations and were also supported to complete a qualification, with accredited course fees being paid via the project and through time-release of one-day per week to complete their studies.

Mini-literature review

- **Youth peer support work is an established concept:** 'Youth peer support work' is an established concept in public health, primarily adopted in youth mental health[52] and substance use service settings,[53] with emerging adoption in broader settings, such as disability support[54] and intimate partner violence.[55]

- **What is youth peer support work?** In the public health sector, peer support workers are people with shared experiences with service/program users, who offer and receive "social and emotional support…with the aim of bringing about social or personal change".[56] Reciprocity is a central tenet of peer support work. Watson's review of the literature identified five overarching mechanisms in the process of peer support. These include: the use of lived experience; love labour; the 'liminal' position of the peer support worker in services; strengths-focused, social and practical support; and the helper role.[57]

- **Benefits of peer support work:** The role of the peer support worker draws upon the youth peer support worker's lived experiences, providing advice to service users in navigating the service and in supporting the organisation to improve service provision to the target client audience, of which the peer support worker is a member. Evidence attests to the "valuable addition" that youth peer support workers can make in youth contexts for organisations and young people engaging in services/programs.[58]

- **Challenges of embedding youth peer support work in organisations**: Emerging evidence suggests that there are challenges in "structurally embedding" youth peer workers in organisations and services, in practice.[59] To ensure the experience is positive for the youth peer support worker and the organisation, recent research recommends the provision of "adequate resourcing", "clear and realistic expectations", and the organisation's adoption of a "growth mindset".[60]

- **Identified need for young people to be employed in youth services/organisations:** Previous research has identified the need for young people to be hired as part of youth work teams in Australia.[61]

Results

a. Peer workers positively impacted organisations' internal perceptions of young people.

Participants reported the positive impact of youth peer workers on partner organisations' perceptions of the capacity and value that young people can contribute to disaster resilience work in local communities. Through embedding young people in teams delivering place-based disaster resilience responses, some partner organisations reported their awareness of the absence of youth voice in their organisational structures and approaches. Some reported an ongoing commitment – including through funding – to employing young people in youth teams beyond the life of the Future Proof project.

> *"We are trying to spread them [peer workers] across a number of services just to have that young voice in our organisation which we don't have many of." (Manager)*

> *"It's so important that people have exposure to having young people in the workplace, and that again, we are just as capable as everyone." (Peer worker)*

> *"Going forward … we will have a full-time youth worker. That's a benefit of this program. They [peer workers] have been able to show our organisation, our councillors and our CEO, the value that [youth teams and young people] can really contribute." (Manager)*

b. Peer workers improved organisations' engagement with young people

Participants reported the manner in which employing youth peer workers improved their organisations' capacity to engage with young people in the broader community. Existing services and initiatives within partner organisations (such as Emergency Management teams) were able to connect with young people in local communities through the strong, credible relationships fostered by youth peer workers. Partners reported that this was particularly important in smaller rural areas where there are fewer young people.

> *"I think that in itself, having a young person also within a council structure, it only instigates to get more positive change … it's made a huge impact on the community that we access. It'd be a shame to see it go." (Peer worker)*

> *"I think the fact that we are role models for the young people we work with to show them that as young people ourselves, you can establish a career within a small community, you can be successful in that career, you can advocate for change and that is huge. How often I thought growing up in a small community that there are no young people here, people came to this community to have children and die." (Peer worker)*

c. Culture and structure of partner team central to peer workers' experience

Participants reported that the youth peer workers' professional and personal experience was related to both the culture and structure of the teams in the partner organisations. In teams where there was an established culture of valuing young people's expertise and participation, youth peer workers reported feeling supported to contribute their own ideas, mentored and offered space and

patience to develop their understanding of working in the context of the partner organisation (such as local government). Where there was not such an established culture with the team or the broader organisation, some partners reported that youth peer workers were treated more as junior and/or administrative staff and were perceived as being less capable because of their age.

> *"We've had the environment there that has allowed those two young people to thrive and develop, and that shouldn't take anything away from what they've brought to the team either. It's been a very nice meeting point in between."*
> *(Manager)*

> *"It's just been so much growth and learning … having that real peer worker structure where we're allowed to learn, we're allowed to ask the questions that we might feel silly but are really important for our professional growth. Just working with young people and expanding my own understanding of what we're capable of, and how if we're given the room and the support to grow and take care of ourselves, how we do." (Peer worker)*

> *"Coming here and having people be okay explaining [things] to me and me not using the correct language but still being able to get my point across, versus other roles where they don't have that and there's a lot of ageism, I guess, and the way I'm treated is very different to here. Even the way I'm treated by other departments around here and spoken to." (Peer worker)*

d. Required organisational resourcing to develop and support youth peer workers

Participants reported the resourcing requirements of developing and supporting youth peer workers in their organisations. The results suggest that youth peer workers who were supported through intentional mentoring, with time allocated to supervisors to do this work, were able to experience the most personal and professional growth and able to positively impact their organisations and communities. While acknowledging the significance in terms of resourcing, some

partners acknowledged how this provided opportunities to young people who were ready for the opportunity and thrived in response.

> *"What worked really well in our organisation was that the peer worker was directly supervised by someone that was working close to the project that had a lot of time allocated to that mentoring side of things. That was youth participation in our organisation and how to support [peer worker] navigating working for council as [their] first job." (Manager)*

> *"It can be potentially very harmful if you don't have people that genuinely want to work with the young person. I said it multiple times to [manager] and other people out in the community, I love that my job is to support [peer worker]. That's my whole job. I can deliver stuff in community, that's a bonus. But first and foremost, that was the priority." (Youth worker)*

> *"I think I had to fight a little bit [in my organisation] for that [peer worker] position to continue [into the extension] because of that investment that it took for our team to support the young person coming in. It was like, 'Do we really have capacity to support another young person coming in fresh, and explaining all of this?'" (Youth worker)*

e. Training and professional development for young people employed as peer workers

Participants reported the positive outcomes for youth peer workers' own professional development, training, and employability. In regional and rural areas, youth peer work models may facilitate young people's capacity development and encourage them to stay in these areas, rather than moving to metropolitan areas to seek work.

> *"I am a young person and I have had access and opportunity … with my career development [in ways] I never expected. I felt myself grow and my horizons opened in terms of career by being able to have this experience and the training that has come with it."* (Peer worker)

> "*The benefits that we actually have personally – not even looking at any of the other young people that we've worked with or given opportunities to them – just us alone, we got a lot out of this project."* (Peer worker)

Place-based Collective Impact

Future Proof has described itself as a 'Place-based' Collective Impact project. The project included 14 partners working together to promote youth participation in disaster resilience in communities impacted by the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires. Throughout the project, the partners came together regularly through formal, structured Communities of Practice. These three-day events provided opportunities for partners to learn with and from one another and develop professional relationships with colleagues and generate ideas for working collaboratively across organisational and regional silos. Additionally, partners came together through informal methods, including self-organising local regional meetings. The Youth Affairs Council Victoria ('YACVic') was the project's Lead Partner (or 'backbone organisation' in the language of collective impact.)

Mini-literature review

- **Theoretical approach of collective impact:** 'Collective Impact' is a particular theoretical approach to undertaking positive social change (often in a particular geographically located community) to address complex social issues.[62] A collective impact approach suggests that 'five conditions' must be present in order for the social change to be effective.[63] These five conditions are described by Smart as:

  1. Common agenda

  2. Shared measurement systems

  3. Mutually reinforcing activities

  4. Continuous communication

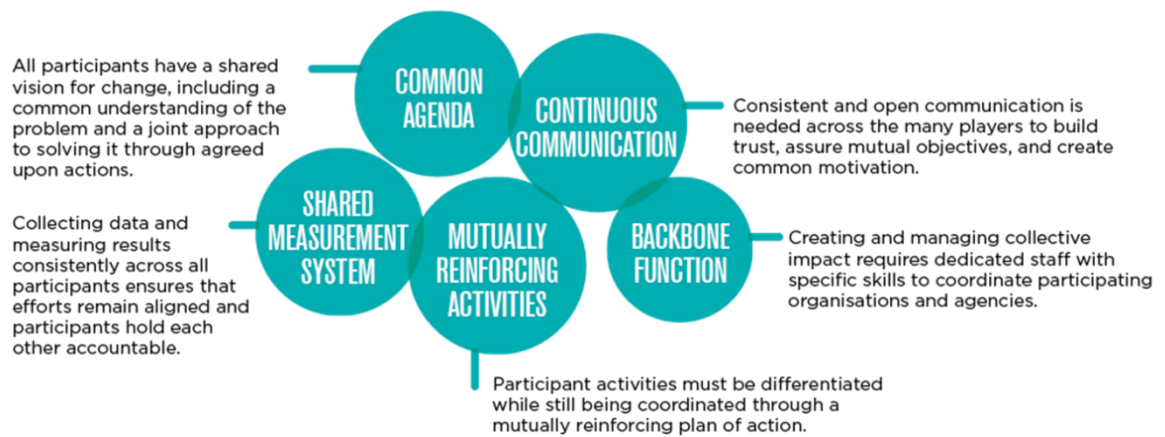 5. Backbone support organisations.[64]

All participants have a shared vision for change, including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.

COMMON AGENDA

CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION

Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.

SHARED MEASUREMENT SYSTEM

Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures that efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.

MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES

BACKBONE FUNCTION

Creating and managing collective impact requires dedicated staff with specific skills to coordinate participating organisations and agencies.

Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.

Image 1: Five conditions for Collective Impact: diagram reproduced from Smart.[65]

- **'Collective Impact' as a 'place-based' approach:** The Victorian Government has included the collective impact framework as a 'place-based' method, identifying that it adopts a "structured approach to collaboration to address social challenges."[66] To enable place-based approaches, the Victoria Government has identified that funding needs to be flexible enough to both allow "local partners [to] tailor their actions to what has the most impact on their community" and to "allow for innovation in an environment where it's safe to fail and learn."[67]

- **Enabling place-based Collective Impact in Australia:** Save the Children has identified the need for place-based Collective Impact projects to be flexible and have the "ability to respond to changing local contexts" to be successful.[68] Based on their experience supporting numerous place-based Collective Impact projects, they employ a five-stage model to promote social change. This five-stages are: pre-initiative (focusing on developing pre-conditions and building an "existing operating momentum"); initiating action; organising for impact (prioritising both authentic engagement with local communities and developing accountability frameworks across the partnership); experimenting and evolving (including "skilling up community to deliver the mutually reinforcing activities"); renewal through growth or adaptation; and sustaining action and impact.[69]

Results

a. Strong common agenda

Participants reported a strong, consistent common agenda across the project, which was essential to developing a strong rapport, shared language, and collective goals between partners. Partners described the common agenda as being related to young people's participation.

> *"Our common agenda was to be youth-led … youth recovery, youth resilience [and] youth voice." (Peer worker)*

> *"We all just want to have more young people involved in what we're doing." (Peer worker)*

b. Funder and backbone organisation demonstrating flexibility in an ambitious project

Participants acknowledged the scale and ambition of the project and the resulting challenges for the Lead Partner (the 'backbone organisation' in the language of Collective Impact projects) in managing a large, federally funded grant with 14 partners. Some participants reported that the backbone organisation offered flexibility in terms of project deliverables when partners' place-based, youth-led activities and strategies fell outside the explicit, pre-determined requirements of the grant. Most participants reported increasing flexibility from the backbone organisation as the project continued into its second year.

> *"In our experience, when we've wanted to do something a little bit differently … [Lead partner] can actually be really flexible with how we do that. I think the creative limitations of Future Proof are really special, and I don't think you get it in a lot of other projects." (Peer worker)*

> *"[Lead partner] stepping back a little bit … felt like [that] gave us that space to be successful and I think that's what changed my mind personally [about the project]." (Youth worker)*

c. Need for additional funded planning time in Collective Impact projects for true co-design and youth-led projects in rural and regional areas

Participants consistently described the need for place-based responses in promoting youth participation, in line with youth work practice and the goals of the Future Proof project. Participants, however, identified tensions between place-based, youth-led responses and the need to articulate a predetermined program as a part of the grant application process. To address this in the future, participants recommended that similar projects are funded for longer periods, with relationship building and co-design built into the funded period. This was particularly important in regional and rural communities without pre-existing youth workers and/or relationships with young people in their communities. Some participants also identified the need for the design of projects to be led by people with regional and rural expertise and experience.

> *"You can't do this full co-design before you've even got the grant." (Manager)*

> *"It's pretty remarkable to see the difference between the first year and second year on what we've been able to accomplish, and I think obviously that first year … still ironing out all the kinks, we were finding what we can and can't do [within the formal project parameters] and probably for six or eight months there, we weren't really able to deliver anything." (Youth worker)*

> *"[Engage us] much earlier in the process. If you're going to do it again [future collective impact projects] then get us in early, get us talking to each other, develop these relationships." (Manager)*

> *"For so long we were like, 'what courses can be funded? We want a list.' And …it got changed …there was a time when it was up in the air." (Peer worker)*

> *"If you're going to do a regional project, you need to know a little bit of what's going on there." (Manager)*

d. Timely, clear communication as essential (back-bone to partners and opportunities between partners) – acknowledgment of complex communication levels

Participants acknowledged the complex communication levels in this ambitious project. These communication levels included not only the Lead Partner and 13 other partners, but also different communication channels for peer workers, youth workers, managers, and partner CEOs. Some participants expressed frustration with the absence of clear communication frameworks, lack of timely responses to information requests from partners, and different information being provided to different partners. Some participants suggested that the staffing challenges at the Lead Partner (owing either to staff turnover or being under-resourced because of the grant restrictions relating to limited administration expenses) in such a complex and ambitious project caused these communication challenges. Partners identified the need for timely, clear communication as essential in these projects. The Lead Partner reported the need for grants to provide greater capacity for administrative expenditure to resource this important role adequately.

> *"There was not really clear frameworks or expectations set up early around communication internally with [Lead partner], with stakeholders, with community, with young people, with anyone." (Youth worker)*

> *"Part of that was the communication strategy. We were looking for the same thing of, 'How do we talk to people about this?' and it took months to get that communication strategy distributed, even the logos and the sense of, 'How do we brand these?' and internally, we talked about just doing it and then there was this conflict of what happens because [Lead partner] is in charge but we've got to talk to people, we've got to present them with something, so we had to wait."*
> *(Manager)*

> *"We got told for months we couldn't [do something with the funding money]. We get told one thing, and then other people got told different things." (Peer worker)*

e. Opportunities to share knowledge, build networks and encouragement between organisations

Participants reported the strong, collaborative relationships that were developed through the project across organisational and regional boundaries. Participants described the manner in which these relationships enabled the sharing of ideas, professional and personal support, and mutual learning. Collaborative initiatives were delivered for young people across communities and some initiatives were replicated by different partners.

> *"I think another really positive thing is that relationship between the peer workers and that network and just for them to – no matter where they are in Victoria, they can pick up the phone, they can share their issues." (Manager)*

> *"It's enabled connection and communication between the people that are actually doing the work. …it's actually between the people; it's actually between human beings rather than organisations." (Youth worker)*

> *"I think sometimes it's a really cool thing because different things work for different communities because of a place-based narrative, but then you might learn something because someone's done something differently to you and you'll be like, 'Oh, okay, that might work for me.'"* (Youth worker)

> *"I think one thing that I've valued is actually getting to know other people who are working in the youth space in different shires. I think it's been really great. I've learnt something from everybody who's managing different projects. The opportunity doesn't come up very often, especially for regional around that same kind of area."* (Manager)

> *"With the careers expo it was really good to see that [activity] go through all of the other councils, which with something like FReeZA [now Amplify], Engage[iv], you wouldn't be doing that."* (Peer worker)

f.   In the future, work collectively with training providers and emergency services rather than each partner individually engaging

Some participants identified the potential for increased outcomes and reduced barriers through the strategic engagement of centralised decision makers with training providers and emergency management services and organisations. While this project prioritised place-based approaches, many partners reported challenges in engaging emergency management services and/or training providers in local areas. Participants recommended that, in the future, the Lead Partner could facilitate strategic discussions with relevant state-wide or regional services to enable partners to engage effectively with these services at a local level.

[iv] FReeZa and Engage are youth-focussed funding schemes delivered by the Victorian Government. Engage focuses on young people's participation and building their skills. FReeZA focuses on young people's engagement in music, cultural events and pathways into creative industries. FReeZA has recently been rebranded as the Victorian Government's Amplify funding program.

> *"I think coming from both directions [with external emergency organisations] you're going to get that more rounded approach because realistically we're on the ground but you need that support from the top [Lead Partner]." (Youth worker)*

> *"They [Lead partner] need to establish the relationships [with external emergency organisations], start the conversations, start creating the space, so that we can then create tailored place-based programs, but at least there's messages coming from the top down within each of the organisations." (Youth worker)*

> *"We had to develop relationships in each space and you still have to do that but if there was 'Go for it, we're part of this as the CFA,' that makes the role that little bit easier because it's not just randoms coming to you, a bunch of young people coming to you saying, 'Hey, you want to play with us?' We had to overcome some of that. I think decision makers [from emergency services and training providers] around the table would release this project to actually fly a bit more." (Manager)*

g. Enabled place-based responses

Participants reported that the Future Proof project enabled place-based approaches and initiatives. This was particularly important as each of the partner's communities had been impacted differently during the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires. Over the life of the project, Future Proof partners organised 292 local events.

> *"I think something that's worked really beautifully is the project lends itself to flexibility across all the partners so that allows a really unique response depending on the location, the circumstance, what the needs of the local community are. So, I think that that's worked really well in terms of responding to those young people that are involved and it's meeting the needs from their community." (Manager)*

> *"It felt really good to be doing a similar project and having this community of practice and coming together with people, doing place-based work in other parts of Victoria and understanding the communities and getting really inspired about what they were doing."* (Youth worker)

> *"We knew from the beginning that the needs of young people in [our area] were going to be very different to the needs of young people in regional areas such as [large regional city], for example. [We] had been directly flame-impacted, and whether or not the young people attending our activities were impacted first-hand or not, they still shared a collective trauma that required sensitivity, patience and understanding."* (Youth worker)

h. Tensions between place-based/youth-led and prescriptive grant requirements, especially as each community was impacted differently during 2019-20 bushfires

While some participants reported that the Future Proof project enabled place-based approaches and initiatives, many participants identified a tension between place-based, youth-led disaster recovery and resilience approaches and the prescriptive grant requirement. Some participants perceived that the Backbone Organisation was directing partner activities too much and there was limited flexibility to respond to the requirements of young people's needs in each distinct community.

> *"[Backbone organisation] don't get to lead it and tell us what to do and what our communities need, when we're telling you the direct opposite of that, or you're not letting us – every community has such different issues, and I think it's a big, common thing, where these big organisations, not from the areas, come in and go, 'this is what your community needs'."* (Peer worker)

"Every community is going to be different and need different things, and it seemed to take a long time for that flexibility to come through, which was like right when we arrived, and so we're just like la, de, da. And the ones who fought for a year to get the teams put in place, we're like, finally, you can go do your work now, but we're just going to take a rest back here. Because it was hard work and is often the way when our funding is put forward with really strict guidelines. It's often pretty hard to deliver that." (Youth worker)

"Our common agenda may be from the funding, the 2019/20 fires, but obviously every shire or every district that got chosen were impacted differently. You're saying, 'Okay, this is youth led, this is place-based', your agendas are suddenly all over the place." (Youth worker)

"I think our biggest struggle has been that there hasn't been flexibility to really respond to how different regions or organisations – where we're up to and what we're doing." (Manager)

Youth Training and Qualifications

The Future Proof project prioritised and funded both informal and formal training opportunities for young people in regional and rural communities. The project enabled young people to enrol in and complete accredited short courses and qualifications. The project not only funded these courses, but provided support to young people in understanding training options and pathways. Two Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) were partners in this project, bringing their expertise. In addition to formal training opportunities, YACVic provided training workshops to young people in communities to increase their skills in a broad range of areas, including advocacy. Partners also engaged external parties to offer specialised training opportunities for young people in their communities.

Mini-literature review

- **Barriers to education and training in rural and regional Australia:** Young people in rural and regional Australia enjoy less access to post-compulsory education than their metropolitan peers. The breadth of training opportunities for young people in rural and regional Australia is "narrower … compared with that in major cities, and decreases with remoteness."[70] Evidence suggests that "location is a much stronger influence" on educational attainment than socio-economic status or achievement.[71] The specific barriers to accessing training opportunities and qualifications locally in regional and rural communities include: secondary education disadvantage in "inadequate subject choices, pathways and opportunities"[72]; limited local training options and/or lack of access to trainers and facilities[73]; and transportation and infrastructure challenges, especially for young people in regional and rural areas a significant distance away from educational institutions.[74] These barriers have resulted in there being a "latest demand for training that is not being met because people lack access to transport or because of the absence of a local provider."[75]

- **Identified need for training for young people to participate in disaster recovery:** Previous research with young people in regional and rural Victoria whose communities had been impacted by the 2019-20 Black Summer

bushfires recommended the provision of local training and qualification pathways for young people to "enable them to be actively involved in recovery and access employment opportunities in their local community."[76] Additionally, research has demonstrated that training initiatives which respond to local community issues (such as disasters) and those which focus on providing a 'skills base' for the local community are needed.[77] Research also suggests that investments in education programs, in the context of disaster preparedness in Australia, have "proven-long term financial returns."[78]

Results

- Over the life of the project, 172 young people enrolled in certificate or diploma level qualifications.

- 109 completed their training qualification over the course of Future Proof. Only one young person did not complete their course (online). The remaining 62 students are continuing their training.

- 13 were commenced at a Diploma level, 27 at the Cert IV level, 18 at the Cert III level, and 109 at the Cert II level.

- As a part of Future Proof, 16 young people completed traineeships.

- 48 completed their qualifications online.

- There was a broad range of courses undertaken. 127 of these qualifications were in emergency management-related courses (such as Cert II Public Safety and Firefighting) and 45 were in community/youth related courses (such as Diploma of Youth Work). Young people undertook the following qualifications:

Formal qualifications	
Course	Number of young people enrolled
Certificate II Public Safety and Firefighting	84
Certificate II Conservation and Ecosystem Management	13
Certificate III Rural Operations	13

Certificate IV Community Services	13
Certificate II Maritime Operations - Coxswains Grade 1	7
Certificate IV Youth Work	7
Diploma Community Services	7
Certificate IV Mental Health	4
Diploma of Youth Work	4
Diploma of Mental Health	3
Certificate II Auslan	3
Certificate IV Environmental Sustainability	2
Diploma of Public Safety (Emergency Management)	2
Certificate II Drone Pilot	1
Certificate II in Animal Care Services	1
Certificate III & IV Animal Care Services	1
Certificate III Agriculture	1
Certificate III Community Services	1
Certificate III Horticulture	1
Certificate III Individual Support	1
Certificate IV in Human Resource Management	1
Diploma of Counselling	1
Intro to Agriculture	1

a. Building young people's skills in regional and rural Victoria

Participants reported the significance of the opportunity to develop young people's skills that the project enabled. In addition to formal accredited training courses and qualification pathways, Future Proof partners hosted or facilitated workshops and trainings for young people in their communities. Over the life of the project, a total of 1598 young people participated in 76 different trainings or

workshops. These ranged from emergency-focused workshops (such as Evacuation Packs and Emergency Management workshops), cultural awareness workshops (such as cultural awareness training), leadership-focused workshops (such as Leadership Camps, events management and grant writing workshops) and wellbeing workshops (such as arts workshops).

YACVic also delivered 44 training workshops to 328 young people in rural and regional Victoria. Seventy-seven young people undertook young advocacy training, 67 young people undertook media training, 54 young people were trained in the Code of Ethical Practice for the Youth Sector, 54 were trained in how to run engaging workshops, and 41 were trained in how to facilitate youth-led meetings.

> *"It's really boosted our ability to engage with local young people and to build skills locally as well." (Manager)*

b.   Increasing future regional employment opportunities for young people

Participants reported that the project had increased young people in regional and rural Victoria's employment opportunities. For some young people, these employment opportunities were immediate, as they were provided with the opportunity to complete required licences or certifications to enable them to gain employment locally. These included:

License of certifications	Number of young people
Traffic Control	56
Working at Heights	12
Forklift Licence	11
Heavy Rigid Driver's Licence	6
Skid, Steer and Excavator	4

Additionally, participants reported that Future Proof had enabled them to connect young people with local employers, particularly in the emergency management sector, with some young people gaining employment through traineeships with related government agencies through the program. For other young people, participants identified that Future Proof had expanded the future employment aspirations for young people, with some young people considering seeking employment in the future within the emergency management sector. Local employment and training opportunities for young people were described as essential by all partners – especially in a context where the majority of young people leave rural areas to further their education or gain employment in larger regional or metropolitan cities.

> "*Training, we had the emergency careers expo recently between [youth worker] and the YAG organised, that was a great success, was a really busy day, a lot of students and quite a few of them not only enjoying the day but seeming to have more direction for where they want to go after school." (Peer worker)*

> "*Getting [young people] to engage with the [emergency] services themselves and thinking I want to become a firie or I want to join the SES." (Youth worker)*

> "*There's a lot of interest in our community, or there would be, from that 18-25-year-old bracket that are working but could get promotions at work and upskill and get better jobs. Like you're working in one of the truck moving – we've got a lot of farmers and stuff, you're working on the tractor, which you don't need a licence for, but you want to go drive the veggie truck, but you need your truck licence." (Youth worker)*

c. Limited local and/or flexible training opportunities for young people in rural areas and limited free TAFE funding options

Participants reported barriers to young people gaining training qualifications in their local communities. Participants identified the lack of local or accessible training opportunities, the lack of flexible delivery programs and the limited free TAFE options as factors impacting young people's training and qualification

pathways. For TAFE courses requiring on-site attendance multiple days a week, young people without access to transport and who are balancing other competing priorities (such as employment) are unable to undertake formal qualifications. Participants also reported that online training options were not attractive to young people in their communities who are seeking more formalised support and connection.

> *"It also costs a little bit, particularly for us being more remote, that systems change where we can't just suddenly conjure up 15 young people who want to do a local TAFE course and who can even access that TAFE course because it's in Wangaratta or Wodonga [two hours away]." (Manager)*

> *"The local TAFEs took a lot off their scope, and had we done that co-design, we could've been talking about that if those courses were no longer on their scope and they've had a scramble and we've done that strategic conversation to say, 'Put them back on your scope please.'" (Manager)*

> *"In our area, without education centres, basically, there wasn't anyone to deliver the training, or the training wasn't available." (Youth worker)*

> *"In my experience, young people are finding it hard to do online studies and we don't have access to the courses that young people wanted to do here." (Manager)*

d. Inclusion of short courses in training scope enabled more young people to be up-skilled and facilitated the development of relationships with young people

In light of the challenges described above in accessing local, flexible, free training options, participants reported that the inclusion of short courses in the training scope of Future Proof enabled more young people to access training and alleviated partners' frustrations that the previously limited training scope of qualifications did not meet the needs of young people in their communities.

Participants also reported that the provision of these short courses enabled youth workers and peer workers to establish relationships with a broader range of young people in their communities, resulting in opportunities to connect the young people into future training pathways and disaster resilience activities in the local area.

Over the course of the project, 1707 young people completed accredited short courses or certificate courses (such as First Aid, Mental Health First Aid or Chainsaw Licence).

Accredited Short Course or Certificates	Number of deliveries	Number of young people
White Card	47	574
First Aid	49	550
Marine Licence Training	12	115
Chainsaw Course	15	85
Food Handling Certificate	16	83
Defensive Driving	6	60

"Rolling out these courses, they're effective, the White Card courses, the Chainsaw courses, the Working at Heights courses have been one way of building our relationships with the young person. We are present at those courses and it's a full day or two with those young people that can recognise our faces." (Youth worker)

"We can't forget that at the start we were talking about training, but we had three opportunities, and they were all long-term TAFE courses. Now we've got a whole A4 sheet full of courses and they're short courses." (Youth worker)

> *"Had we had short courses from the start, our whole frustration around reporting, templates, all the issues between the LLENs and the partners, most of that would have been gone because we would have been able to have different conversations with young people. For six months, seven months, we had to sell Cert IVs and IIIs and year-long TAFE courses." (Youth worker)*

e. Tension between pre-determined qualifications identified in the grant application and young people's training interests

Participants reported that the pre-determined list of qualifications included in the grant application (and subsequently funded) did not consistently align with the training interests or needs of young people in their communities. Partners also suggested that a broader perspective of disaster recovery and resilience needed to be considered, to incorporate a broader range of training qualifications that would meet both the young people's needs and the community's needs in terms of recovery. When the scope of qualifications was expanded to include short courses, much of this tension was resolved.

> *"The scope of the courses and the scope of what is 'Futureproofing' our community [in the project], that was decided without young people's involvement, yet we keep saying that we [young people] are leading." (Youth worker)*

> *"It's virtually just been ticking a few boxes, getting young people through this training whereas we really want to identify what young people are wanting and what skills they're wanting, not [pre-determining training]." (Manager)*

> *"We have a massive skills shortage and I'm sure most regions do. After two years of the bushfires coming through, one house was built out in a more remote community because all of the workers were in town, doing this big, massive build that received a big injection during COVID. I think if the areas of study were scoped a lot wider, we would not have any issue engaging young people in terms of heavy machinery, construction, things like that where it absolutely helps to contribute towards the recovery of the community, to put people back in homes, building fences, doing things that really impact the farming community hasn't been allowed to happen." (Manager)*

f. Recognised expertise of LLENs/Junction but different operating models created challenges/overlaps

Participants recognised the expertise of the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) in supporting young people to access training opportunities. However, partners reported challenges in the design of the project, including confusion relating to how the LLENs and local government partners/NGO partners worked together to support young people into training. Participants reported that there were challenges in target audiences, identifying the LLENs' focus on school leavers and those outside of formal schooling. Some partners identified that they do not have many young people who have left school remaining in their regions.

> *"I think the role of the LLENS in both regions has been really good. Because the time it takes to research those qualifications and everything can be immense, and on top of everything else we just couldn't do it." (Youth worker)*

> *"I think it goes back to that initial co-design of the project though because for me, the relationship between the LLENs and their role, the clarity of the role that training and the purpose of that training, it hasn't been responsive to our young people." (Manager)*

> *"There was quite a lot of confusion around the role of the LLENs and I'm still not 100% sure but my understanding is that they mainly support school leavers or young people who are at risk of leaving school. So, a lot of - in our area especially, we don't have a lot of school leavers who stay here."* (Manager)

> *"I wish instead of having a partner [to arrange the training], it'd be really great to go straight to an RTO and have that partnership with the RTO rather than this extra step."* (Youth worker)

Continuity of Youth-Focused, Disaster Resilience Funding

The Future Proof project was initially funded for a period commencing 1 April 2022 until 31 March 2024. The project was subsequently extended in March 2024 to 31 December 2024 after extensive advocacy by the Lead Partner to the funding body. This extension was requested to enable partners to continue to work with young people in their communities and increase outcomes for young people in communities. This was a time-only extension, meaning no additional financial resources were provided.

Mini-literature review

- **Identified need for long-term funding in disasters:** Considering the evidence of increasing frequency and severity of disasters[79], research has identified a need for funding beyond immediate, short-term recovery needs. Funding should focus on long-term social, economic, and environmental outcomes.[80] The recent ANU 'Disaster Finance and Insurance Research Roundtable' called for long-term sustainability in government funding approaches.[81] Existing government funding priorities in Australia "heavily skew" spending towards disaster response and recovery, rather than prevention and resilience efforts to "decrease or eliminate social and environmental impacts."[82] Evidence from natural hazard disasters suggests that governments should commit to ongoing funding of local organisations to improve outcomes for communities.[83]

- **Identified need for increased funding for youth workers:** Previous research has established the need for increased funding for youth workers in rural and regional areas.[84] Additionally, previous research has also identified the need for government funding of youth workers in regional and rural areas in the context of disasters.[85]

Results

a. Rebuilding/recruitment/establishing of youth teams takes time

Participants reported the challenges of recruitment in regional and rural areas, particularly where there had not been previous/recent funding for youth-focused roles and services. The recruitment challenges and need to on-board and upskill staff created delays in the project. Participants suggested that the time to conduct recruitment and staff development in rural and regional areas should be built into future projects.

> *"We didn't have staff. That was our other big issue in the beginning too. There was an assumption that there would be members of the community with the appropriate qualifications just sitting and waiting for jobs to come and that they could go and join." (Manager)*

> *"Part of the objectives of the program is to build that capacity for … the community to support young people but then there was no time to upskill and prepare and deliver that mentoring for the person who is going to work with the young people as well so it was all like, 'Okay, let's improvise putting this job up,' and assuming that everyone would just be immediately prepared for it."*
> *(Manager)*

b. Relationship building (with young people, schools, organisations, stakeholders, etc.) takes time

Participants reported the time investment required to build trusted relationships with young people in their communities and with local organisations and stakeholders. Participants also identified the challenges in aligning with organisational planning cycles – especially when engaging local schools. Finally, participants noted that it takes time to build momentum and credibility with young people in local communities about new initiatives.

"I think from the whole project's point of view, the structural impediment is the really limited time that we have. This is an example that it's not something that we can fix in a year. It's probably a two or three-year project and we ran an [event] but we need to run that every year or every second year for a number of years to really get traction but emergency services are all on board. They loved it and the schools were all on board but to see the flow-on effects, it takes a few years for that to happen." (Manager)

"Because of the time limit that has been set, you've also got to connect with young people at the exact point in time that they've got capacity to engage further. If they're not in a position right then and there, you've got to move on and keep pace and then that opportunity potentially – if you ran an [initiative again] the following year or the year after, they might be in a better position to be involved and engage." (Manager)

"And we had to introduce ourselves going into community and explaining the project and at all levels, not just to the community but to CFA, to SES so we how are we supposed to be connecting the dots and connecting people and trying to engage those people into those spaces but those spaces weren't even aware of us." (Manager)

"It's still extremely important to take the necessary time to listen to young people and their ideas or concerns before coming up with the solutions for them. Even if the plan is excellent in theory, it will always fall short if the young people who are the intended participants don't feel a sense of ownership or belonging to the project." (Youth worker)

> *"The delivery of successful programming is directly related to the relationships and trust built between our organisation and our community. Stakeholders had to first understand what the project was about, and trust we were there to listen and wanted to serve them in the best possible way. Furthermore, young people who hadn't been engaging in community activities had to perhaps hear from their friends a couple of times that events were worth participating before they found the courage to join." (Manager)*

c.   Impact of the extension on engagement with young people

Evidence of the impact of the extension is evident in comparing the results reported between December 2023 and December 2024. In the additional year provided by the extension[v], an additional 10,448 young people were able to participate in locally organised events (in the extension year, 163% of what was achieved in the first two years combined). Further, an additional 174 young people were trained by YACVic (in the extension year, 112% of what was achieved in the first two years combined).

Participants explained that the additional time provided by the extension was crucial to the success of Future Proof, enabling partners to capitalise on the momentum and established trusted relationships that had been developed over the first part of the program.

> *"When we got our momentum and we found that space to be able to extend the program and the team has just been a gamechanger, I feel like so much more got done." (Youth worker)*

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[v] The extension was provided for eight months (from March 2024 to December 2024), however partner reporting was in December 2023 so the figures for the extension relate to the final year (additionally most young people were on school holidays for most of Jan-Feb 2024).

> *"The additional time provided by the Future Proof extension allowed our initiatives to actually take off with the necessary momentum that wouldn't have if the project finished [earlier]. Ultimately, the time from March-December 2024 was probably our most productive in terms of youth events, activities, and engagement by far." (Youth worker)*

> *"The project extension was crucial for the program's success. Future Proof built great reputation with time, and the feedback received after activations were conducted was overwhelmingly positive. This feedback was passed on by word of mouth and made the promotion of upcoming activations easier." (Manager)*

d. Need for ongoing youth-focused capacity in organisations

Participants reported that there was a need for ongoing funding of youth-focused staff in their organisations to enable their work with young people in the context of disaster resilience to continue. In light of the participants' statements relating to the time it takes to develop trusted relationships with community organisations, stakeholders, and young people themselves, the continuity of funding for youth-focussed staff was identified as essential. Some participants also noted that the activities and programs they facilitate with young people are inexpensive, however the need for funding to transport young people in regional and rural areas without public transport was a priority.

> *"We probably need a [human] resource more than we need the money because a lot of the stuff we do – like when these guys do careers days, it costs us almost nothing." (Manager)*

> *"There's a lot of things we can do at really low cost but we need feet on the ground to do that work." (Manager)*

> *"...because of the geography of our shire, we have the five towns spread out over quite a distance. Having to navigate doing events and programs and trainings that is accessible for as many people in the shire as we can ... being able to provide transport to those has been really good."* (Peer worker)

e. Need for longer term funding for disaster recovery and resilience work

Partners reported the need for disaster recovery and resilience funding to be longer term. Some partners identified that the Future Proof project felt like the beginning of their work and many partners reported that there was much more work that could be done now that they had (re)established their youth-focused teams and engagement with young people in their communities. Some partners also recommended that funding be more flexible, owing to the broad range of activities/programs related to place-based disaster resilience work.

> *"I feel like we've got another two or three years, five years' worth of work to do here."* (Manager)

> *"If we still had this money, what could we accomplish? It'd just be so much and I think it'd be amazing to be able to continue to have this much money for emergency management in our community. That'd be the dream."* (Youth worker)

> *"Recovery and resilience is a long-term proposition. It's not a short term and the opportunities like the training and the connections that have started, it really is just the beginning. ... From that emergency management resilience, recovery perspective, I find [it] really disappointing because another two years, three years, we could see some incredible inroads into young people and our whole communities, their resilience for future disasters."* (Youth worker)

> *"If they could grant me one wish, that would be that we keep investing in resilience for future resilience for young people with that broadness that it doesn't have to look like one thing. It doesn't have to be, 'You have to get these qualifications,' or 'You have to do this,' and we're seeing that with FReeZa and Engage that they're being a lot more broad about funding." (Youth worker)*

f. Need for sustainable, ongoing Youth Advisory Groups

Partners identified the value that Youth Advisory Groups ('YAGs') brought to their communities, to local organisations, and to young people themselves. Some partners reported that their YAGs had identified the importance of their ongoing role in their communities. Many partners reported that their YAG was central to engaging other young people in their communities and connecting young people into training opportunities, other services, and to councils.

> *"YAG also have the mentality that this is something that will and should go forward in the future. They want to know how they can make it work outside of us. They want to be an individual body. They see the importance of their work and the importance of having each other in that group and how successful it is to have each other and they're so much stronger for it which is really cool." (Peer worker)*

> *"Our YAG [is] doing a lot of really cool things in their community, initiating training within our young people at our new youth hub … has been amazing and beneficial." (Peer worker)*

g. Opportunity to see Future Proof as a pilot to build evidence base for future internal and external funding

While sustainability was a core concern for partners, two partners viewed Future Proof as an opportunity to pilot initiatives with young people in the context of disaster resilience to build an evidence base for future funding and support of youth-focused programs. They identified the way Future Proof funding had allowed them to trial different programs with community organisations or schools

and identify what worked. Another partner focused on establishing sustainable relationships between young people and community organisations and members to ensure young people were supported and included after this funding had concluded. One partner suggested that, in the future, similar projects could be specifically designed as pilots to focus partner efforts on establishing sustainable relationships and programs with stakeholders in communities and prioritise building an evidence base.

> *"...post-Future Proof, we're mainly focusing on having sustainable relationships and building those connections with other people in the community, and young people. So that when the project's over, they can go to those people in the community, because they know them, and they've got a connection already."*
> *(Peer worker)*

> "*I liaised a lot in the last six months with the school programming and just kind of setting expectations [for] the future years that we had this amazing amount of funding to use over the last two years, and that's not going to exist anymore. Over the last two years, they've had opportunities to trial programs that they never would have been able to access for their young people. Now, they can identify which ones are really great and really impactful, and know that when they're allocating finances to those programs, that it's going to be of benefit. For the schools, they've really appreciated the opportunities to trial things, that they always thought might possibly be the right thing. And the council wouldn't have been able to support those programs with the funding that we had before."*
> *(Youth worker)*

Embedded Researchers

As described in the beginning of this report, Victoria University was the embedded research partner in the Future Proof project. VU's role included relationship building, methodological scoping, ethics approvals, data collection, analysis, presentations at workshops, national and international conferences, as well as the publication of findings in national and international journals and publications.

As a key focus of Future Proof was upskilling and building capabilities of young people in the partner communities, the VU team also engaged with partners to actively involve them in the research process. A primary focus, that evolved across the project, was the level of interest in research from the youth peer workers and youth workers in partner organisations. The VU team sought to build research skills for the conduct of research, collection of data, and analysis and dissemination of findings.

A youth participation approach of youth-co-researchers was adopted and youth co-researchers collected and analysed data and presented at national conferences as well as co-authoring scholarly publications. Youth workers also engaged in similar projects, and a number continue to engage in research dissemination with the VU Research team.

Mini-literature review

- **Embedded researchers:** Consistent with Cook and Brown,[86] Ward et al. suggest that embedded research in organisations or projects can be conceptualised as a process of creating new knowledge that is "produced when academic and [community] organisational ways of knowing are brought into dialogue with one another to create new understandings."[87] Ward et al. suggest that embedded research conducted by researchers in-residence within an organisation will embody the following 'key tenets':[88]

1. knowledge and expertise that researchers bring with them;

2. research-based knowledge that they broker into the organisation;

3. new insights developed from gathering and interpreting data in situ;

4. negotiation of expertise and the contextualising of external knowledge; and

5. co-production of new understandings.

- **Benefits of embedding researchers into non-academic settings:** Embedding research and academic researchers into a non-academic organisation or project can "represent a rich source of empirical, theoretical and methodological knowledge that can help organisations with pressing challenges."[89] As such, embedded research often involves locating the academic researchers within the physical or geographic location of the community, organisation or project. Working alongside or with non-academics, this may be described as 'being in-residence'.[90]

- **Challenges with embedding researchers into non-academic settings:** Embedded research in a community organisation or project can be complex and non-linear and may often involve working with multiple participant groups and with competing values, priorities, needs, and expectations. This may often be confusing and lead to frustrations for both researchers and organisations. As such, Ward et al. conclude that much of the literature on researchers being embedded in organisations "highlights the importance of agreeing and communicating the intentions, structure and processes of embedded research early and clearly."[91]

Please also see the literature review relating to community-based research and the embedded researcher at the beginning of this report.

Results

A quantitative post-session survey was provided to participants following four VU-facilitated focus groups and research validation sessions with 48 participants in total. The results of the mixed methods survey are presented below:

- **98%** of participants said that the sessions had: 'helped them to Reflect on the project and their role';

- **98%** of participants said that the sessions had: 'increased their understanding and conceptualisation of the project';

- **98%** of participants said that the sessions had: 'enabled them to learn from others through hearing about their experiences in the project';

- **98%** of participants said that the sessions enabled them to: 'reflect on new ideas about what might possible in their communities';

- **98%** of participants said that the sessions had: 'been a useful opportunity to discuss and reflect on youth participation';

- **98%** of participants said that the sessions had: 'been useful overall'; and

- **100%** of participants said that: 'Victoria University's involvement in the project overall has been useful.'

See Appendix B for knowledge dissemination outputs.

a. Embedded researchers across project allowed for development of trusted relationships with partners

Partners reported that VU's role as the embedded research partner was valuable. Participants also identified the opportunity to build trust and respect between partner organisations, peer and youth workers, and the VU research team. This was described not only as being essential for the research component of Future Proof but also important for the project overall.

> *"I think VU being a partner on this project was one of the best moves that could have been done."* (Peer worker)

> *"VU is there, they're listening and present. I just think that respect and everything they've done to form this little circle of trust we've got [has been important]."*
> *(Peer worker)*

b. Embedded researchers provided academic expertise and enabled upskilling of participants and partner organisations (especially young people) through formal and informal training

Participants reported that the embedded researchers' mentoring, training and support of peer and youth workers enabled them to develop skills and confidence in data gathering and storytelling, which they brought back to their organisations and into other projects in their roles. Participants also identified the opportunities provided by the embedded researchers in enabling young people to engage in conducting and disseminating research beyond their own organisations.

> *"They've helped staff showcase their thinking and abilities beyond the organisation."* (Manager)

> *"In a professional way…they're looking at the project, what's working, what's not… and we can use the [research] to reference our work or change things in the future."* (Peer worker)

> *"Our [peer] workers have loved having the opportunity to learn how to do posters or write articles, so I think that's beyond the scope of VU's expected role."*
> *(Manager)*

"…I went to a sociology conference with [VU researchers] and my eyes were just so open. …I think it's realising that we're not just in a bubble as there is a lot more. I think my eyes were a little bit more open after meeting [VU researchers], especially after that conference." (Peer worker)

Dissemination	Number of youth co-researchers
Abstract submissions to national conferences	6
Poster presentations at national conferences	5
Research design, conduct and presentation at national conferences	4
Peer-reviewed articles in Journal of Applied Youth Studies	1
Paper presentation – international and domestic conferences	8
Poster presentation – national conference	1

Table 2: Knowledge dissemination: Youth co-researchers as authors (young peer workers and youth workers).

c. Embedded researchers were a trusted sounding-board, providing feedback loops and facilitating reflective practice

Participants reported that the embedded researchers facilitated reflection processes, provided feedback loops, and shared academic expertise. Participants valued that the embedded researchers were able to engage in discussions, facilitate problem solving and critical analysis of the project, and validate complexities. These processes enabled changes to be made in the delivery of Future Proof.

> *"The VU research team has helped me think laterally as well, improving my problem solving. They ask 'Is there a different way we can do this? Or what do you mean by that, when you say that that's not working? What does this mean for your community?' It is something I will take with me." (Peer worker)*

> *"The reassurance from VU as a body that our team were hearing back that, 'Many of you said it is complex,' and "It's not just us." (Manager)*

> *"I would just add the role of VU at times, I don't know how you saw it but at times it felt because we didn't have the backbone support, particularly for youth workers and peer workers, it was VU, which didn't have to be your role at all and we saw that particularly with [researcher]. [Researcher] was there for that, just having these debrief sessions and trying to cope with that anxiety." (Manager)*

d. Embedded researchers changed the way partners perceive research, researchers and/or the role of universities in community work

An Independent Evaluator conducted interviews and observations focused on the embedded researchers' impact on Future Proof. The Independent Evaluator identified the manner in which the embedded researchers enabled participants to see a different side of research – one that was collaborative and deeply connected to community work. The Independent Evaluator identified that this shift made research and academia more broadly relevant and useful for real-world contexts, specifically how it can be a powerful way to influence public perception and create change.

"VU's approach was collaborative and anchored in trust, allowing for deeper engagement, reflection and capacity building in participatory evaluation. This approach shifted participants' perceptions of the university, academia, research and researchers. For the peer workers in particular, research was viewed as more inclusive and relevant, igniting a passion for sociological thinking and critical inquiry in development work." (Independent Evaluator)

DISCUSSION
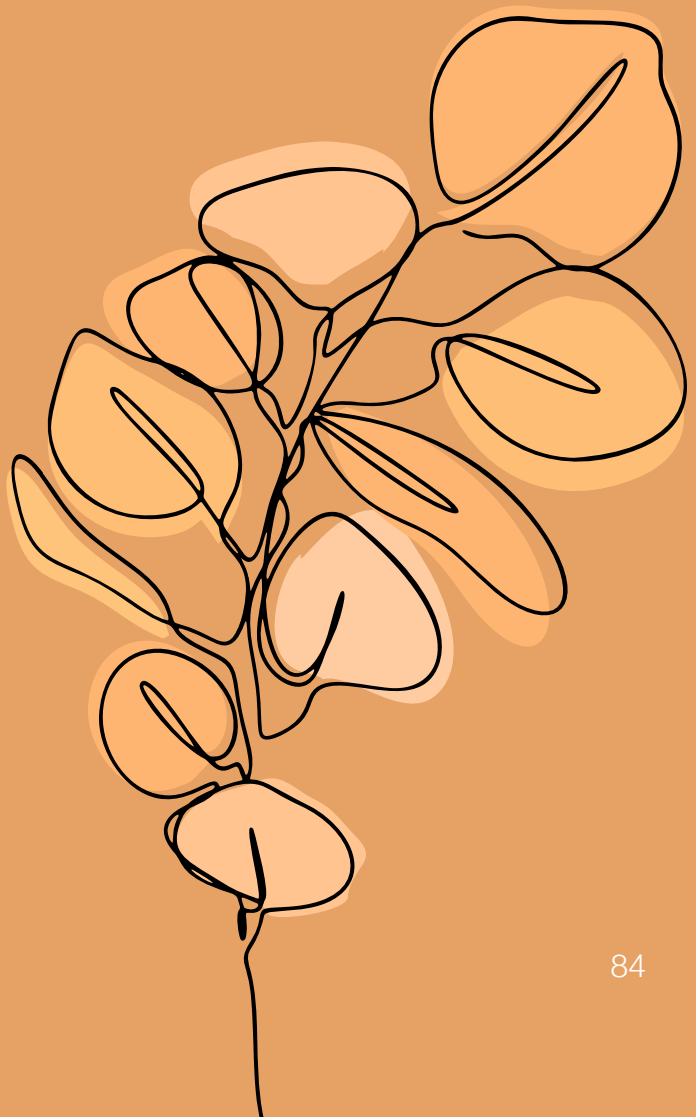
Discussion

The Future Proof project was a complex and ambitious endeavour, that has demonstrated how to build expertise and networks with young people, youth workers, and community organisations to achieve locally relevant, place-based outcomes following disaster(s). The project was led by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria ('YACVic'), who brought together 14 partners from across regional and rural Victoria and Melbourne to engage young people in recovery from the 2019-2020 bushfires. The aims and objectives of Future Proof were premised on work already undertaken by YACVic and VU researchers that identified young people wanted to be more actively involved in disaster management. Underpinned by youth participation principles, professional youth work and community development work, and community-based research, Future Proof was designed as a 'place-based Collective Impact' project. The aim was to allow a degree of agency for the individual partners in their own communities and organisations while also being part of a Collective Impact project to consider the broader effect of bringing together bushfire-affected communities from the North-east and East of the state. As the embedded research partner, VU provided a sounding board for partners and participants throughout the project and captured evidence of where the project was successful, how challenges were addressed, the level of flexibility and commitment to change, and evidence from partners of how they would have taken a different approach if given their time again.

Upskilling young people in the partner communities through training and qualifications and connecting with young people were the key objectives of Future Proof. In the first instance, partners worked with young people in their own communities, identifying opportunities for training and qualification pathways. The reported number of young people engaging in – and completing – training and qualification courses was substantial. To start, 172 young people enrolled in, or completed, certificate or diploma level qualifications, including Certificate II in Public Safety and Firefighting, and Certificate IV in Community Services. A total of 1598 young people participated in

trainings or workshops, some in multiple, like Evacuation Packs and Emergency Management workshops and Cultural Awareness workshops. In addition, YACVic delivered training workshops to 328 young people in areas such as youth advocacy and facilitating youth-led meetings. Others obtain licences or certifications in areas such as Traffic Control and Working at Heights, and 1707 young people completed accredited short courses such as White Card and First Aid. These licences and certifications enabled disaster preparedness and facilitated employment pathways for young people in regional and rural Victoria. It is clear from these figures that the Future Proof partners have more than surpassed the objective of upskilling and building the capacity of young people in bushfire-affected communities.

It must be noted though that the successful upskilling of young people through Future Proof was not without its challenges. Existing barriers to the availability of training and qualifications courses for young people in regional and rural areas were combined with inflexible delivery programs, limited free TAFE options, and the onsite expectations of delivery. Young people themselves expressed a desire to undertake alternate qualifications and were looking for greater support and connection for their study than that originally offered. Similarly, the partner communities expressed a desire to deliver training and qualifications that better met their needs in terms of recovery. While the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) contributed significant expertise relating to training pathways in regional Victoria, the role of the LLENs in the project was not always an easy fit because of their pre-existing remit and different ways of operating to the other partners. The determining factor in terms of the successful outcomes was the flexibility that was afforded with the eight-month time extension to the project. This was welcomed by partners and ultimately became the determining factor, alongside the partners' commitment, to the Future Proof project meeting its training objectives.

In addition to training and qualifications, the Future Proof project engaged with young people in the partner communities in a number of ways. Firstly, each partner organisation employed at least one youth peer worker who was aged from 17-25; they created a Youth Advisory Group with young people aged from 12-24; and ran 292 local events and activities that were attended by 16,831 young people[vi]. The locally

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[vi] Individual young people will have attended multiple events. It was also difficult in some instances to distinguish attendees by age, so this figure has been reported as a conservative estimate.

organised events and activities certainly connected with young people in communities, and partners worked hard to ensure these were well attended.

In relation to the key principle of youth participation in disasters and connection with young people, the research identified the significant role the youth peer workers, youth workers, and Youth Advisory Groups played in the success of this project. While they undertook different roles, partners reported that these had greatly assisted them to have a youth-focused capability in their organisation that was not evident in the same capacity prior to Future Proof. Partners reported that the presence of young people in youth work roles facilitated their expertise to both engage directly with young people and to better support organisations to engage across the disaster lifecycle. The youth peer workers and youth workers in the Future Proof project played a significant role in the project, enabling the partners to share the expertise and experience of young people across their organisation. This included making internal and external connections with community development and disaster response departments and staff.

The Youth Advisory Groups were highly valued for the strong engagement of young people in local communities, their ownership of the group, and advocacy for each other and other young members of their communities. Members of the Youth Advisory Groups were actively involved in the co-design and co-delivery of local programs that focused on disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience. The ability to pay young people in the Youth Advisory Groups and provide transport to and from meetings was a key factor in the sustained involvement and, ultimately, their capacity to be actively involved in community events and activities.

At the same time, the place-based, Collective Impact approach of Future Proof allowed access to a greater scale of interventions, strategies, and outcomes than may have been achieved otherwise. Across the three years of *Future Proof*, we witnessed the establishment of strong relationships between the individuals employed on the project, and organisational and regional connections that enabled partners to work together to achieve the project goals. There were, of course, challenges. It would be impossible to bring together 14 partner organisations without challenges and barriers to overcome. While the Lead Partner managed these across the life of the project, many of the challenges were raised by partners at the beginning of the project. Some of these focused on the assumptions around training accessibility in regional and rural Victoria which are outlined above. Challenges in communication between partners and the Lead Partner proved complex, with staff having different reporting lines within their

organisation and the project. It was also clear that partner organisations had strongly held understandings of their community needs and wanted greater flexibility to respond accordingly. Each community also had different experiences of the 2019-2020 bushfires, requiring more localised understanding of the impact. These were at times outside the scope of the project so required the Lead Partner to determine the alignment.

Relationships were also pivotal to the implementation and successful delivery of Future Proof. These included relationships between partners and the Lead Partner, between partners themselves, between the different roles employed through Future Proof, and with the embedded research partner. Relationship building takes time and the face-to-face Community of Practices held eight times across the project enabled all partners to come together and share learnings, evidence, and experiences. The collective nature of Future Proof was evident as partners created their own sub-groups, with the North-Eastern partners and Eastern (Gippsland) partners coming together. Collectively, they worked hard to identify connections and training options, particularly with organisations in the emergency management sector. Partners also reported the value of having an embedded research partner. There was an acknowledgment of the trust and respect between the partners and the research team, and appreciation of the research training and opportunities that were created in the project.

The inclusion of an embedded research team, Victoria University, in the project enabled all partner organisations to not only participate in research, but build their research skills. In keeping with the youth-focused nature of Future Proof, the young peer workers and youth peer workers were the primary focus of this upskilling. However, their participation in research activities would not have been possible with the support of their Managers and Partner Organisation. The increased research capacity also saw Future Proof findings disseminated widely across conferences, workshops, and in publications, both scholarly and for general audiences. These continue into 2024 and we envisage beyond, as the young peer workers and youth workers previously part of Future Proof continue to identify ways to conduct research with young people in their communities.

Disseminations to the end of May 2025 include:

- **Four peer-reviewed academic articles** – authors included one youth worker.

- **Eight domestic conferences** – authors on presentations included four young peer and youth workers who attended and presented at an academic conference for the first time.

- **Three international conferences** – three young peer workers attended one of the Australian-based international conferences, their first academic conference.

- **Six abstract submissions submitted for domestic, disaster-related conference** – authors included multiple young peer workers.

- **Eight forums and workshops, attended by multiple young peer workers.** Three young peer workers attended and actively participated in an international disaster workshop with disaster specialists from the United Kingdom and Turkey.

  (*See Appendix B: Knowledge Dissemination for more detail.*)

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Through Future Proof we witnessed the benefits and potential of youth participation and place-based efforts in bushfire recovery. Led by youth workers and youth peer workers, and supported by local organisations and facilitated by YACVic, Future Proof demonstrated how building expertise and networks with young people offers a constructive way to achieve real and locally relevant outcomes in communities following a disaster(s).

Future Proof has provided new knowledge and insights into how to actively involve young people in disaster recovery and demonstrated how youth participation, professional youth work principles, and community development practices can be utilised to achieve this goal.

Future Proof more than achieved its training and qualification goals. The level of upskilling was exceptional and a testament to the partners' commitment to finding ways to provide opportunities to engage young people in training qualifications.

The collaborative effect of the partnerships ensured a greater collective impact in the partner communities across the North-east and East of Victoria.

In conclusion, we offer the following recommendations based on the direct feedback from partner organisations:

1	Similar projects should be funded for longer periods of time, enabling for relationship building and co-design to be undertaken within the funded period.
2	The Lead Partner should facilitate strategic discussions at national, state, and regional levels with relevant organisations to enable stronger local partnerships and engage effectively at a local level with these services.
3	Flexible grant funding would enable the broad range of activities/programs related to place-based disaster resilience work.
4	Create a continuity of funding for youth workers in local councils and community organisations around disaster management.
5	Establish sustainable Youth Advisory Groups in local communities.
6	Pay young people in Youth Advisory Groups for their time to enable stronger and sustained connections with organisations, their peers, and their communities.
7	Remove barriers to enhance equity of free TAFE program offerings in regional and rural areas.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Future Proof partners

Partner Organisation	Type of Organisation	Completion date
Alpine	ACCO	December 2024
AWAHS	LGA	December 2024
Corryong	LGA	December 2024
East Gippsland	LGA	December 2024
GELLEN	LLEN	June 2024
Indigo	LGA	December 2024
Junction Support Services	NGO	March 2025
Mansfield	LGA	December 2024
Moogi	ACCO	December 2024
NELLEN	LLEN	February 2024
Victoria University	Embedded Research University	March 2025
Wangaratta	LGA	December 2024
Wellington	LGA	March 2024
YACVic	Lead Agency, Peak Body for young people and youth sector	March 2025

Appendix B: Knowledge dissemination

Conference	Date	Location	VU's Role	Outcomes / Audience
XX International Sociological Association World Congress of Sociology: Resurgent Authoritarianism: Sociology of new entanglements of religion, politics and economies	June 2023	Melbourne, Australia	Paper presented: *'Children and Young People As Agents of Change in Disasters: Flipping the Risk and Vulnerability Discourse to Enable a Capability Narrative'* – with young people attending.	Shared interim findings with global youth and disaster practitioners and experts. First time session co-hosted between youth and disaster sociology streams to focus on young people in disaster context – will now be continued at next ISA (2025).
Australian Disaster Resilience Conference -2023: Resilience Reimagined	August 2023	Brisbane, Australia	Paper presented by YACVic with data provided by VU: *Local self-determination, collective support: adapting collective impact models for disaster resilience, response and recovery.*	Shared learnings on Collective Impact project with national community and emergency sector – emphasising need for both training and youth participation.
			Abstract submissions: Supported six separate abstract submissions from partners to the ADRC conference.	Six partners trained in research knowledge translation – increased partner

Conducted workshop, additional training, and worked with partners one-on-one.	capacity to conduct and share learnings with the emergency sector.
Poster presentation by VU: *Joining the dots to reimagine community resilience: empowering young people in disasters.*	Sharing initial findings with national emergency and community sector relating to the potential of youth peer workers employed in organisations to transform organisational perspectives on young people and foster relationships between emergency management teams and young people in communities.
Poster presentation by Wellington Council youth worker (abstract and poster development supported by VU): *Promoting inclusion of young people in emergency volunteering structures.*	Sharing lessons with national emergency and community sector relating to the barriers and enablers to promote youth volunteering in the emergency sector.
Poster presentation by peer workers (abstract and poster development supported by VU): *Investing in us is investing in our future.*	Sharing lessons with national emergency and community sector relating to the need for young people to actively participate in disaster resilience, planning, etc.

The Australian Sociological Association Conference 2023: Sustaining the Social: Voices, cultures, natures	November 2023	Sydney, Australia	VU supported four peer workers (as youth co-researchers) to design, conduct and present their research: *'Politics of exclusion? Hearing young people's voices in natural hazard disaster resilience.'*	Sharing findings relating to ways in which young people are structurally marginalised in disaster resilience in their communities. Four young peer workers upskilled in research. Peer workers were supported to review literature to identify gaps, design the research, collect and analyse data, draft abstract, and develop presentation for conference.
Climate Emergency Conference 2024: Councils and communities reclaiming the climate emergency	April 2024	Melbourne, Australia	Paper presented by VU: *Young people as active citizens – a call to action for councils.*	Sharing lessons with over 200 emergency and sustainability council staff from Victoria (and more online nationally) to help them identify practices to enable youth participation in disaster resilience in their councils.
Nordic Youth Research Symposium: Youth in a just and fair world	June 2024	Tampere, Finland	Paper presented by VU: *'Youth & Community Work for Climate Justice': A case for eco-social pedagogic youth work.*	Shared research relating to youth work practice and approach in light of young people's concerns about climate and disasters with international youth and community work practitioners.

Disaster and Emergency Management Conference 2023: Leading in times of crisis – empowering change and recovery through learning, innovation and adaptation	July 2024	Gold Coast, Australia	Paper presented by VU: *'What Did We Learn? Engaging Young People to Enable Innovative and Big Picture Thinking in Local Communities Around Disaster.'*	Sharing findings relating to ways emergency management organisations can engage young people in disaster preparation and resilience efforts. National audience – primarily government and emergency management organisations.
Victorian Greenhouse Alliance Conference 2024: Local government leadership on climate	August 2024	Melbourne, Australia	Workshop facilitated by VU and co-facilitated with youth co-researcher. *'Inclusion is essential! How and why councils can make sure resilience planning includes everyone in the community'.*	Shared lessons from Future Proof with emergency, sustainability, and community council staff from across Victoria to help them identify practices to promote inclusion of young people in resilience planning in their councils.
Journal of Youth Studies Conference 2024: Stop the Clock	September 2024	Belfast, Ireland	Paper presented by VU: *A critical 'eco-centric' approach to youth work* (as a part of a panel on 'Youth Work in and Beyond the Anthropocene')	Building upon youth and community work's social pedagogic traditions, this paper shared research relating to an eco-centric approach to youth work practice. This includes thinking and acting beyond the individual; cultivating reciprocal care and connection; and practicing critical pedagogies of place. International youth and community work practitioners and academics.

Australian Disaster Resilience Conference 2024: Resilience Reimagined	September 2024	Sydney, Australia	Paper presented by VU and YACVic: *'Empowering young people in rural Victoria for disaster resilience.'*	Shared findings from Future Proof – particularly in relation to training outcomes, funding challenges, and sustainability with national community and emergency sector.
TASA 2024	November 2024	Perth, Australia	Paper presented by VU with youth co-researcher: *'(Perceived) clash of climate action and material interests: young people's everyday political practices in regional and rural Victoria.'*.	
			Paper presented by VU with youth co-researcher: *'Climate change and the experience of disasters for young people: constrained by local level politics.*	

Table 3: Conferences

Event	Date	Location	Role
Natural Hazards Research Forum 2023	May 2023	Melbourne, Australia	Participant
NIDR Forum	August 2023	Brisbane, Australia	Participant
Natural Hazards Research Forum 2024	May 2024	Adelaide, Australia	Participant
Emergency Management Conference 2024: Disasters have no boundaries – navigating the increasing frequency and complexity of events	July 2024	Melbourne, Australia	Participants
Australian Disaster Resilience Conference 2024: Resilience Reimagined	September 2024	Sydney, Australia	Resilience Lane exhibitor
NIDR Gathering	September 2024	Lismore, Australia	Participant
RMIT network showcase	October 2024	Melbourne, Australia	Showcase presenter

Table 4: Webinars/meetings/forums

Peer Reviewed Journal Articles
MacDonald, F., Woods, B., Hall, C., Corney, T., & Ryan, D. (2023). Joining the dots to reimagine community resilience: empowering young people in disasters. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management, 38*(4), 85-89. https://doi.org/10.47389/38.4.85
Gorman, J., Baker, A., Corney, T., & Cooper, T. (2024). Youth and Community Work for Climate Justice: Towards an Ecocentric Ethics for Practice. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, *18*(2), 115-130. https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2024.2327379
Cooper, T., Corney, T., & Gorman, J. (2024). Youth Work for People and Planet: Integrating Insights from Ecopedagogy into Youth Work. Youth, 4(2), 735-744. https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020049
Woods, B., Danks, N., Gorman, J., MacDonald, F., & Corney, T. (2025). Climate-Related Perceptions of Young People with Lived Experience of Disasters in Regional and Rural Victoria, Australia, *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-025-00178-x, submitted on behalf of the Centre of Excellence: young people & disasters

Table 5: Journal articles (to date)

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