

Youth Solutions research coordinator: Emily Deans

How first-hand research is shaping youth service's programs and practices

Youth Solutions Research and Design Coordinator Emily Deans uses the phrase “formative evaluation” a lot. *“My role is everything research and everything evaluation, but it's less about statistics and numbers and more about voices, experiences and attitudes,”* she says.

Emily joined the health promotion and youth drug and alcohol prevention charity in 2018 and immediately and enthusiastically set to work on a research project. The project, talking to young people aged 12 to 25 about their drug use, will contribute invaluable insights to the programs Youth Solutions delivers to the community.

“If we want to effectively deliver these programs to young people, then we need to hear their voices, listen to their experiences,” Dr Deans says.

The project has been conducted under the auspices of an Academic Advisory Group, comprising a Wollongong University academic experienced in social work and juvenile justice and two academics from Western Sydney University with experience in youth homelessness and CALD and marginalised communities. The trio provide a code of ethics for the project, especially as it deals with under-age youth and their experiences with drugs. The academics will also be the co-authors of the project's findings which is under review with the Health Promotion Journal of Australia.

Emily says the project wouldn't have been successful without the ethical “safe space” the advisory group has provided. It has enabled the young people involved in the program to engage openly and honestly and share their experiences without fear of repercussion.

“The recruitment and participation of young people was always going to be difficult,” Dr Deans explained. *“Many were recruited from drug and alcohol services throughout South Western Sydney. One on one interviews were preferable though if they had a friend or two we could do a small focus group.”*

Emily says many had interesting stories to tell and the young people all held strong opinions on drug and alcohol use. She says she wasn't surprised by their experiences though she was surprised, and pleased, by their willingness to share those experiences.

There were two obvious realisations at the end of the project, Emily said. *“The first was that young people have the answers themselves. They might need the structure and support and services to be put in place around them, but often they have the answers for what they need. They need to be at the table when decisions are being made about their behaviours. We can't do anything without their input. They are willing to give their opinions and put their tuppence in. And the project has brought home how important it is in health promotion, that if you are going to provide a program you need formative evaluation.”*

WHERE EMILY IS UP TO: Emily is currently working on another qualitative research project with young people from the LGBTIQ+ community, who have helped review existing AOD health promotion content to create a unique resource with young people's input. The project is being funded by The Aurora Group.

About us

For more information, visit youthsolutions.com.au or connect with Youth Solutions on social media.

Youth Solutions is a health promotion and youth drug and alcohol prevention charity. For more information about Youth Solutions, or for drug and alcohol education, information, referral, or the current activities of Youth Solutions: (p) 02 4628 2319, (e) info@youthsolutions.com.au (w) www.youthsolutions.com.au.