



youth affairs network qld

WHAT IS A “PEAK BODY”?

**Abridged Version of *What is a “Peak Body”?*
Summary & Analysis of Key Documents 1995-2005
(available at www.yanq.org.au)**

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Youth Affairs Network of Queensland, 2006

www.yanq.org.au

What is a “Peak Body”?

This sounds a simple question. Yet, a major study into community services peaks² published in 2003 listed 4 pages of different definitions³. Each peak body surveyed had its own definition. Other researchers and commentators had their own definitions. A significant problem in arguing for the importance, existence and funding of peak bodies in Queensland, and Australia more widely, is the lack of agreement about what peaks are ... or should be!

Peak bodies exist in many different Australian industries. A similar range of differences in roles and expectations are also reflected in other industries. But ... because the community services industry depends on government funding, it has been scrutinised in a way no other industry has!

The History of Peaks

Peak bodies in the community services industry have grown out of a variety of networks, alliances and interest groups⁴. They were generally *formed from the grassroots level in response to an identified need and/or the infringements of rights of a particular group*⁵. Their development into a formal peak body was a gradual process that began with people meeting informally to share concerns, then realising they could work together to support each other and try to make things better. They then discovered that other groups were doing the same thing elsewhere in Queensland. So all of them joined to form a State group to lobby/advocate for change and provide mutual support. In some cases, a group of State/Territory peaks have joined together to form a national peak body.

Over time, these *communities of interest*⁶ have formalised into stronger, (often) funded organisations. Most have paid staff whose job is to act in the interests of a particular group or act to address a particular issue. Some peaks have developed according to their target group (eg. youth). Some have developed in response to a particular issue (eg. housing). More specialist groups combine the two (eg. National Youth Coalition for Housing).

Given their organic process of development, it is not surprising that a diversity of types of peaks exist – with unique (and sometimes complex) structures, with different role priorities, undertaking different key functions, addressing different issues and sometimes taking different positions on the same issue.

Definitions of Peaks

Peak bodies are generally made up of community organisations which provide services to particular disadvantaged groups. These organisations represent the interests of these consumers and their sector or the industry as a whole at a state or national level. Some peaks also have individual consumers, or representatives of consumer organisations, as members. However, if an organisation **only** includes consumers as members, it is a **Consumer Group** rather than a **Peak Body**. (Some people use the language *Service Provider Peaks* or *Industry Peaks* to describe traditional peak bodies, and *Consumer Peaks* to describe consumer groups which are broad-based and play an advocacy role.)

It is generally agreed that peak bodies in the community services industry have 2 main areas of functioning:

- **Outward-looking (social reform) roles** – these include policy development, feedback on policy/programs to government, advocacy and representation to government and the wider community, consultation, lobbying, community education, and networking with allied interest groups.
- **Inward-looking (industry development) roles** – including member support, information dissemination, coordination, infrastructure development and networking between members (including development of regional infrastructure).

Some peaks focus on their social reform roles, whereas some see their industry development roles as more important. However, to be a peak body, they **must** include some outward-looking roles (otherwise they are a **Network**, rather than a peak).

A few peak bodies provide direct services to consumers. However, this is rare, and is usually in the form of a pilot project (eg. **researching** new models of practice or **experimenting** with programs for a new target group), rather than ongoing provision of services. Where this occurs, it is important to clearly separate the peak and service delivery parts of the organisation.

There are two definitions that reflect the main themes in relation to the role of peaks. The first, from the Industry Commission, is often used by governments (eg. the section in bold was adopted by the Queensland Department of Premier⁷ in a Discussion Paper⁸):

*A peak council is a **representative organisation that provides information dissemination services, membership support, co-ordination, advocacy and representation, and research and policy development services for its members and other interested parties.***

The peak council role does not involve direct service delivery. Direct service refers to services provided to the clients of member organisations, rather than services provided to members or interested parties. (Industry Commission 1995:181)

In her major national study of peaks, Rose Melville drew on the ideas of many peak bodies to arrive at this definition:

A 'peak body' is a non-government organisation whose membership consists of smaller organisations of allied interests. The peak body thus offers a strong voice for the specific community sector in the areas of lobbying government, community education and information sharing between member groups and interested parties. (Melville 2003: ix, Recommendation 1)

It is important to note that **Round Tables** and other focus-type groups are totally different from Industry Peaks or Consumer Groups. Whilst they can play an important role in encouraging individual participation or personalising consumer experiences, they can never **represent** the broad and varied target groups of which they are a member.

Changing Role of Peaks

The Federal Government is driving the process to try to change the role of peak bodies in

the community services industry. Many have described this as a move **from a democratically-driven model to a business-efficiency model**. This has serious implications for the funding and actions of peaks at a national, and possibly state, level. For details and analysis of these trends, see the more comprehensive paper available from YANQ⁹.

In summary, the main trends are:

- 1. Increasing emphasis on ‘representation’.** The government argues that the traditional model of peaks does not adequately represent the views of consumers. (It is interesting that they don’t seem to have the same concern in relation to other industries!) The Commonwealth is moving toward funding *Consumer Peaks* **instead of** existing *Industry Peaks*.
- 2. ‘Partnership’ and threats of defunding.** The Commonwealth has already defunded some national peaks (most notably, the only national youth affairs peak, AYPAC¹⁰, in 1998), and many other peaks have reported being threatened with defunding. (Peaks believe that this is based on their advocacy and lobbying activities – again, a routine and accepted part of the role of peaks in other industries). It seems that ‘partnership’ is being used to describe peaks being funded to undertake the tasks required by government, rather than focusing on issues of most concern to their constituency. (It is ironic that this means they are less able to be genuinely representative of the interests of their constituency.)
- 3. Tendering, rather than grants.** One key way to get peaks to prioritise government agendas over their own, is to provide funding tied to specific outcomes (through service contracts), rather than to run their organisation as a whole. One major concern about this approach is that government could use a **competitive** tendering process (which has already occurred in some Australian States, and is common in Britain). This would mean that private organisations (eg. business consultancy companies) could compete with existing peaks for funding.
- 4. Increasing ‘accountability’.** Community services peaks (and other community services organisations) have **always** been required to meet higher levels of financial reporting requirements than many bodies from other industries that receive government funding (eg. private consultants, think tanks, industry research bodies). Yet, it is **constantly** suggested that non-government organisations (NGO’s) are not sufficiently financially accountable. The Commonwealth is also proposing increased **functional** accountability through use of service contracts.
- 5. Decreasing direct political engagement.** This needs to be seen as a part of a wider global trend toward ‘stage-managed politics’¹¹. Use of service contracts plays a key role in encouraging peaks to interact with bureaucrats, rather than Ministers / politicians / media / other decision makers. This, added to ongoing threats of defunding, has already functioned to reduce the willingness of peaks to be a **public** voice for the poor and marginalised in society. This trend can be expected to continue. (It is reasonable to ask: *What is the point of peaks existing, if they can’t lobby for their constituency?*)
- 6. Diminishing role of research.** The words *research* and *advocacy* have largely disappeared from Federal Government descriptions of community services peaks, over the past 10 years. They have been replaced with words like *consultancy* and *feedback*. In other words, peaks are under increased pressure to simply gather the **opinions** of consumers. They are being discouraged from generating **arguments**, using research and evidence to support and strengthen the legitimacy of these opinions.

Conclusion

Only peak bodies in the community services industry can represent the wide and varying interests of the poor, marginalised and disadvantaged in society. It is important that peaks recognise their own value, and the critical role they can play in the long term viability of the social and economic fabric of Australian society.

Peaks must actively articulate their opposition to being replaced by weakened, individualised, unrepresentative structures. They must take a proactive stance:

- Setting their own policy priorities which address the full range of issues affecting their constituencies
- Advocating for adequate funding independent of government departments to enable them to continue to operate efficiently and effectively
- Determining and articulating their own definitions of key language such as *accountability, representation and performance appraisal*
- Re-engaging directly with political processes and minimising bureaucratic engagement on policy issues
- Using the term *industry peaks*, rather than the more reductionist *service provider peaks*, to assert their parity with other industries.

The detailed paper on this topic proposes a range of strategies to address the trends outlined here. They are too complex to include in this summary. Suffice to say ... it's not all 'doom and gloom'!

Endnotes:

¹ cc Youth Affairs Network of Queensland 2006. This is a brief summary of a more comprehensive paper: by Suzi Quixley (2006) **What is a Peak Body?: Summary & Analysis of Key Documents 1995-2005**, YANQ, Brisbane.

² The term "community services" is used throughout this document. It could be used interchangeably with "human services" or "welfare".

³ Melville 2003:2-5

⁴ Peaks Working Party 2000:1

⁵ YANQ 2000:1

⁶ Peaks Working Party 2000:2

⁷ Department of Premier (2000)

⁸ *Draft Discussion Paper – The Role and Function of Peak Councils*

⁹ YANQ – Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc.

¹⁰ AYPAC – Australian Youth Policy & Action Coalition Inc.

¹¹ Melville 2003:iii

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Other Useful Resources

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