It was a privilege to lead a team of young and motivated Australians to the APEC Voices of the Future conference. This year saw us hosted in Da Nang, Vietnam during the APEC Leaders week. The theme of APEC 2017 was – creating new dynamism, fostering a shared future – this theme shaped our discussions throughout the conference.

Voices of the Future is an excellent initiative which sees youth delegations from across the 21 member economies of APEC converge on the host country and hold a Youth Forum producing a Youth Declaration which is delivered to the Leaders of the APEC member economies. It provided us with a unique opportunity to share our respective economy’s perspective both formally during the Youth Forum and informally during the many networking and cultural events.

We had the opportunity to see world leaders deliver various speeches and dialogues at the APEC CEO Summit. Our delegation had the opportunity to see Prime Ministers Turnbull, Arden and Razak as well as Presidents Trump, Durterte and Jinping speak at the APEC CEO Summit.

I found the informal opportunities particularly insightful. I had a chance to practice my Bahasa with my Indonesian colleagues as well as discuss our respective struggles with nationalism - they had questions about a particular politician wearing a Burka in our Senate and I questions about the recent Jakarta Governor race. I discussed the ongoing regional tensions on the Korean Peninsula with young South Koreans and heard of the great difficulty of getting a job from young Japanese. Perhaps most heart-warming was the pride with which the young Vietnamese talked about the future of their ascending and resilient nation.

Each conversation yielded deeper insight into the unique challenges youth faced in our corner of the region – and yet in the face of these challenges we came to broadly similar conclusions. Now was not a time to close down it was time to open up.

The long-term goal of APEC - to build a peaceful, stable, integrated and prosperous community in the Asia-Pacific - has perhaps never looked more fragile and yet its core ethos burned bright in the youth of the region. There was unrelenting optimism emanating from the young leaders from across the region – even as Typhoon Damrey raged outside our Youth Forum.

An old Chinese proverb says that when the winds of change blow some build walls and some build windmills – this an apt metaphor for the optimism with which the youth across the region approached our Youth Declaration.

Our policy recommendations sought to address the shared challenges of renewed nationalism, populism and protectionism through a more inclusive approach to economic policy.

We advocated action to improve economic, social and financial inclusion – that equality of opportunity was necessary to unlocking the full potential of member economies and that economies should continue to provide tangible solutions to social barriers particularly for women, ethnic minorities and indigenous people. Micro-financing was a mechanism which we called out as a game-changer for women and indigenous groups.

To entrench social mobility within the consciousness of member economies we suggested increasing financial and economic literacy and access to basic services such as online banking as well as an economic liberalisation curriculum for delivery across member economies.

Alongside the views of my peers from across the region, I would note that while we need to maintain a focus on increasing opportunities across our individual societies – the doing of sustainable economic growth - we also need a need a new and more accessible narrative for trade liberalisation.

APEC could and should provide a platform for renewed advocacy for trade liberalisation. We can no longer assume that the arc of international economic policy will bend toward greater integration, we must in this post-truth world take a more calibrated and coordinated campaign to make the case for the benefits of open economies.

Counterintuitively while citizens across APEC have never been more connected we see greater siloing of understanding – yet in pockets of disadvantage the gap between the haves and have-nots has never been so clearly broadcast and understood. The digital revolution will only aggravate these trends.

As the leaders of tomorrow and those that will inherit the stewardship of our region the Voices of the Future, however, remain hopeful that we can rise to these challenges through collective responses and shape a shared future.

APEC Voices of the Future 2017 remains a formative experience in my young adulthood and has renewed my drive to engage in the wicked problems confronting the leaders of tomorrow, I particularly thank the Duke of Edinburgh Award Australia for this opportunity.