

Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship Submission

Youth Policy – Discussion Paper

The Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship (OMAC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Youth Policy – Discussion Paper led by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). OMAC supports a whole-of-government policy framework and a coordinated response to dealing with issues affecting young people, including culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) youth who face particular challenges that make them more vulnerable to disengagement and disadvantage.

OMAC coordinates and leads the Victorian Government's multicultural policy and program implementation. OMAC's work is dedicated to strengthening links between CALD communities and government, and improving service accessibility and responsiveness for CALD communities. OMAC also works with CALD youth through several youth-focussed initiatives to build community harmony and social cohesion across Victoria's community. As such, this submission focuses on the critical issues facing CALD youth, including recent arrivals, to ensure that their needs are addressed in the development of the whole-of-government Youth Policy and any subsequent programs and services that may flow out of the process.

These issues presented below are consistently raised through OMAC's consultative channels, including the Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network (MMYN), and are similar to those highlighted in the forthcoming Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) report on their youth forums held in 2015 – *Strengthening Social Cohesion – Engaging Our Youth Our Future*. OMAC would welcome the opportunity to continue to work closely with the Office of Youth as it develops the Youth Policy.

Introduction

The 2011 census data reveals CALD youth represent a significant proportion of the total youth population in Australia – 25 per cent of all youth aged 12-24 are either born in a non-English speaking country or have some CALD ancestry. Victoria is home to almost a third of the total CALD youth population – around 292,262 youth were born in or have at least one parent that was born in a non-English speaking country such as China, India, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and Iraq.

More recently, Victoria has welcomed a significant number of CALD youth as part of its ongoing refugee and humanitarian intake from countries such as Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria and Ethiopia. Between 2008 –2013, 6,519 humanitarian youth arrivals settled in Victoria (26% of total humanitarian arrivals)¹.

There is also approximately 4,178 asylum seeker youth (aged 0-25 years) residing in the Victorian community awaiting processing of their protection claims.² Asylum seeker youth, including those who arrived in Australia without family or guardians (Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors), are vulnerable to disadvantage due to limited access to Commonwealth supports and benefits, the high instances of post-traumatic stress disorder, mental health and other health disorders and the lack of

¹ Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2014 Election Statement, <http://cmy.net.au/sites/default/files/CMY%20Election%20Statement%202014%20%5BSUMMARY%5D.pdf>

² <http://www.border.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/statistics/ima-bve-June-15.pdf>

a long-term stable environment. Further uncertainty over the ability to access education, employment and housing with the increasing strain on state government and community services resources, risks entrenching disadvantage over the longer-term.

As one of the most culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse places in the world, it is important for the Victorian government to understand the specific issues and challenges faced by CALD youth. The issues will differ between individuals depending on their particular cultural group, events in their country of origin, migration and settlement paths to Australia and the extent of their support network and services received once residing in Australia – all of which would impact on the capacity of the individual to fully participate in employment and society more generally.

CALD youth play a key role in forging and maintaining links with the broader community, fostering greater cross-cultural understand and social cohesion. This is particular to second generation migrants who may benefit from having higher English language proficiency and education attainment levels than their parents, and greater social and economic mobility³.

Employment

A key concern raised during the Multicultural Youth Roundtable, which was convened by the Minister of Multicultural Affairs in May 2015, was the issue of unemployment and the particular barriers to employment faced by youth from CALD backgrounds.

While unemployment is a major issue that cuts across the youth age group, the 2011 census data shows the CALD youth cohort has a lower rate of employment compared to their Australian born counterparts – 54.3% of 18-25 year olds of CALD backgrounds in Victoria were either full or part time employed compared to 71.2% of those born in Australia.

Recent data shows youth unemployment figures have steadily increased since 2011 – 14.9% as at October 2015⁴ – and is highest in areas of concentrated disadvantage, including Melbourne’s outer urban fringe and parts of regional Victoria where there is a higher population of CALD communities⁵. This suggests that CALD youth population unemployment figures may similarly be on the increase.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that hiring bias (conscious or unconscious) presents an additional hurdle for CALD youth. This is despite international research indicating that companies with greater diversity among staff tend to perform better and see greater returns than those with less diversity⁶. These findings point to a need for better strategies from Government and multicultural bodies to increase cultural awareness in the workplace, in addition to the broader social community. The benefits of this work are clear; greater social cohesion and increased workforce participation mean greater economic returns, community well-being and prosperity.

There is an opportunity for the government, as a model employer, to lead by example by trialling recruitment practices that reduce the potential for unconscious bias. For example, de-identifying

³ A Significant Contribution: the Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants, Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011

⁴ Department of Premier and Cabinet Key Economic Indicators – 16 October 2015

⁵ <http://vcoss.org.au/blog/vcoss-snapshot-youth-unemployment-in-victoria-and-northern-metro/>

⁶ Why Diversity Matters, McKinsey & Co 2015

applications of potential candidates at various stages of the recruitment process could go some way to addressing this.

OMAC would welcome the opportunity to work with the Office for Youth to develop strategies and programs to address hiring bias impacting CALD youth. This could include communication strategies to draw attention to potential bias and enhance cultural awareness.

Other factors impeding employment include uncertainty about career pathways and level of access to information that is authoritative and appropriately tailored to young audiences, including those of CALD backgrounds. Coordinated efforts from employers, educational providers, and government are required to ensure information about qualification outcomes, employment pathways and government funding assistance is accurate and reflects current labour market conditions.

The Minister of Multicultural Affairs recently convened the Ministerial Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs, which includes membership from the Victorian Government; peak business, multicultural and sporting bodies; the VMC; aged care services; union and the not-for-profit sector. There will be three working groups established to support the Council, covering employment and economic inclusion; sport and social inclusion; and communications and community engagement. OMAC would welcome Office for Youth representation on these working groups to raise and progress work on youth-related issues.

Marginalisation and Discrimination

There is general acceptance in Australia of the benefits of multiculturalism. The Scanlon Foundation surveys find a consistently high level of agreement with the proposition that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia’ (86% in 2015)⁷ and the level of social cohesion as measured by the Foundation has been trending positively in recent years. However, these attitudes are more complex when broken down into views on different issues such as the arrival of asylum seekers and age groups. There are significant differences in attitudes of young adults in response to questions on national identity and cultural diversity, who are more accepting of immigration, cultural diversity, asylum seekers and less concerned about ‘maintaining the Australian way of life’.

While the survey found broad acceptance of diversity, the VMC Youth Forums and Multicultural Youth Roundtable prompted concerns that this attitude is not necessarily reflected in public settings, with participants reflecting upon instances of exclusion in public facilities, discrimination on public transport and employment (as discussed earlier). Participants cited a need for cultural awareness and the important role for the media to steer away from resting on stereotypes and racial profiling.

The Victorian Government also have a role to play in promoting multiculturalism in a way that resonates with all community groups, and positioning our diversity as one of the state’s greatest assets – not only to promote community harmony and social cohesion but also to form part of the economic narrative to strengthen trade outcomes, particularly in tourism and international education.

⁷ Mapping Social Cohesion – the Scanlon Foundation surveys 2015

Civic engagement and youth representation across government

An issue that was at the forefront of the recent VMC youth forums, and one that the DHHS Discussion Paper seeks to address, is the sense of disconnect felt among young people from their community and government leaders. While this sentiment may stem largely from intergenerational issues, the feeling may be exacerbated for those of diverse backgrounds who feel that their voice is not heard or adequately represented in their respective community groups, let alone reflected in government policy and mainstream media outlets. The Multicultural Youth Roundtable also elicited concerns about the lack of role models in the community who provide a positive example for young people and elder generations alike.

While there are examples of civic engagement initiatives directed at youth, such as the MMYN, the Centre for Multicultural Youth and Youth Parliament, it is clear that there is a lack of public awareness about these consultative mechanisms and a need to increase the profile of these initiatives through social media and communication channels that have a high usage among young people. Consideration could also be given to the influence of existing networks to portfolio areas that are not deemed 'youth-specific' policy areas and embedding youth representatives in advisory bodies across the Victorian Government.

Initiatives that provide young people with the opportunity to take up leadership roles also need to be complemented by programs that build their capacity to carry out their role. For example, the MMYN members have access to ongoing training opportunities in media representation and networking. The use of mentors are an effective way of imparting knowledge and experience gained 'on-the-job' and may also assist in bridging any gaps between generations.

Implications for OMAC

There is a clear role for OMAC to strengthen its strategic influence and engagement across the Victorian Government in multicultural policy and program implementation, including that relating to CALD youth.

OMAC is currently streamlining its significant grants funding programs to ensure that service provision is responsive to the needs of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, in line with the outcomes arising from the Victorian Auditor-General Office audit, and driving a systematic approach to improving cultural understanding and competence across government.

There is also the opportunity for OMAC to strengthen its stakeholder engagement outcomes. OMAC has an extensive network of contacts – including multicultural and faith organisations (and through them, businesses with particular cultural or faith affiliations), service providers and advisory groups and councils – which could be leveraged to better support the implementation of government policy and programs.

As above, OMAC would welcome the opportunity to continue to work with DHHS to address these and other issues impacting CALD youth in Victoria.