

Education for refugee and newly arrived young people – Position Paper

The Multicultural Youth Affairs Network NSW is a network of services committed to improving the opportunities and outcomes for multicultural young people in NSW. The MYAN NSW works to develop appropriate policies, strategies and resources that address multicultural youth issues at the local, regional and state-wide levels. It does this through consultation with the youth, family and multicultural sectors, state and local government, and multicultural young people.

Multicultural young people in NSW

The MYAN NSW use the term multicultural young people to refer to those aged 12-25 who are newly arrived, those from refugee backgrounds and Australian born young people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. According to the 2006 Census in NSW there are 1,227,475 people aged between 12-25 (ABS 2006). Of these, 12% were born in a non-English speaking country and over 80 languages are spoken at home (ABS 2006). Between 2005-2010, 30% (7,310) of all Humanitarian arrivals were young people aged 12-24 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, January 2011). In 2009-10 alone, 23,993 people aged 12-24 migrated to Australia of these there 6,608 or 28% arrived to NSW. Of these young people 1,071 arrived as part of the Humanitarian Program, 4,143 came as part of family migration and 1,390 came as part of skilled migration (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, July 2010).

Education for refugee and newly arrived young people

Approximately one quarter of all students in NSW government schools come from language backgrounds other than English, both overseas and Australian born. These students speak over 80 different languages as a their first language and hold a range of religious and spiritual beliefs (DET, 2005). In addition, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) identified that each year NSW public schools enrol between 1,100 and 1,500 newly arrived refugee students and that in 2009 there were approximately 12,000 refugee students at NSW public schools (DET, 2010).

The focus of this paper is specifically on young people who are from refugee backgrounds and those newly arrived because the MYAN NSW, through research and consultation, identified that they face significant challenges in accessing and remaining engaged in the NSW education system.

Key Issues

- **Length of time in Intensive English Centres (IECs)**

Newly arrived young people from refugee backgrounds are often not given sufficient time in Intensive English Centres. Currently in NSW they are entitled to three to five school terms in IECs, and often further intensive support is required for them to be able to be prepared to enter mainstream schools.

- **Disrupted education and education level and age**

The majority of refugee young people have had a disrupted education and need time, support and flexibility to catch up to their Australian-born peers who have been engaging in education since early childhood (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). Often there are additional challenges for these students when they are placed in grades at school that are beyond their level of capability, based on their age. This is particularly acute for those young people from non-literate societies and those who have spent years in refugee camps prior to arrival in Australia. These young people are expected to enter into a school system after little or no formal education, in an environment with other young people who have moved through the Australia education system over many years.

- **Navigating the education system and education pathways and transitions**

Upon arrival in Australia young people are often faced with an education and training system that is very different to anything that they have previously experienced. Unfamiliarity with the school system and style of learning, as well as the vocational education and training (VET) system, means that ensuring young people and their families are aware of the educational pathways available to them can be challenging (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). Further, there are often inadequate levels of support to assist these young people in the transition from IECs to mainstream schools and to vocational education and training programs. This lack of support means that the transition can be very stressful, resulting in high levels of difficulty managing the new setting (and therefore achieving education/training outcomes) or disengagement from education and training.

- **Finding space and time to study**

Often newly arrived and refugee young people live in over crowded housing with little space to study, with responsibilities for assisting family in the resettlement process - including earning an income, cooking for their family or caring for younger siblings (MYAN Australia, 2010a). In addition, the need to catch up often requires more time studying, which can increase the pressure on the young person.

- **Unrealistic expectations from family and/or self**

There is often an intense pressure from both family members and young people to perform in the Australian education system, which offers new and previously unavailable opportunities. There is also often a significant disparity between the education and career aspirations of young people and their language and literacy abilities (Refugee Council of Australia, 2010).

Recommendations

The MYAN NSW recommends the following to improve on current initiatives and reduce the incidence of disengagement of refugee and newly arrived young people within the NSW education system:

1. Ensure young people who need to remain in Intensive English Centres (IECs) beyond the current three to five term allocation, can do so for up to two years.
2. Improve support for refugee and newly arrived students in the secondary school system, by:
 - a. Increasing investment in transition programs between Intensive English Centres and mainstream schools and vocational education and training programs.
 - b. Increasing support for students when they are placed in a school year according to age but are without the equivalent level of education.
 - c. Investing in the coordination of homework clubs and supported study groups across the state.
 - d. Investing in mentoring programs in the secondary school setting, as a key strategy to support the health and wellbeing of students.
3. Increase accountability and transparency by the NSW Department of Education and Training by publicising an annual report on key activities with refugee young people.

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