



Submission on the Multicultural Framework Review

September 2023

Introduction

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People, I welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Multicultural Framework Review (the Review).

My mandate is to promote and advocate at a systemic level for the rights, interests and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia. My advocacy is directly informed and guided by my regular engagement with children and young people. My role includes ensuring that the State meets its obligations in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The UNCRC sets out the interrelated, interdependent and indivisible rights of all children, and clearly outlines that governments must protect children against all forms of discrimination on the basis of their nationality, ethnicity, status, religion or other grounds (Article 2). Article 30 sets out the right of children to enjoy their culture, profess and practice their religion and to use their own language. Article 22 specifically recognises that refugee children are due special protection to realise their rights.

Meeting 'the current and future needs of multicultural Australia' and 'achieving social cohesion' depends on how well our systems and services empower people of all ages and backgrounds to understand and exercise their rights. It also depends on ensuring that decision makers and service providers are aware of their obligations and accountable for decisions and outcomes that affect children and young people's lives.

Background and summary of recommendations

This submission draws on my engagement with thousands of children and young people since 2017, with a particular focus on children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

In 2022, I engaged with over 147 children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in a series of conversations that shed light on their perspectives and experiences of racism and discrimination. In 2018 and 2021, I co-hosted youth symposiums with the Australian Migrant Resource Centre (AMRC) to hear directly from young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds about their experiences navigating education and employment pathways. I encourage the Review Panel to consider the [Tapping into our Talents](#) and [Leading for our Future](#) reports alongside this submission.

This submission is also informed by conversations with adults, including parents as well as educators, advocates and service providers who work with children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. It also includes insights from children aged 8 to 12 years old as part of my annual Student Voice Postcards initiative.

Children and young people value equality, fairness, and respect. They want to live in communities free from racism, discrimination and identity-based bullying. They want to see respect for diversity reflected in the systems and services they engage with, as well as in the media and leadership positions. They want all children to enjoy the same

opportunities, positive relationships and connections to community and culture, regardless of their background.

Children and young people's voices and experiences are often marginalised in policy and service design and delivery. The rights and experiences of children and young people in relation to the Review's terms of reference require particular consideration and tailored responses. The Review Panel should consider the broad systems and supports that facilitate social cohesion and active citizenship for all children and young people. The Review is an opportunity to address systemic barriers to participation and inclusion, including racism and discrimination, in ways that:

- Are child- and youth-centred, family-aware, strengths-based, and trauma-informed.
- Recognise children and young people's right to participate in decision-making that affects their lives (Article 12 of the UNCRC).
- Coordinate efforts across all levels of government, the private sector, community organisations, families and local communities, schools, workplaces and the media.

Specifically, I recommend that the Review Panel consider the policy and legislative settings required to:

- 1. Focus on children and young people's rights and diverse experiences across all ages and stages of development.**
- 2. Give effect to the National Youth Settlement Framework (NYSF) and facilitate children and young people's active citizenship.**
- 3. Address systemic barriers to participation and inclusion, including in relation to poverty, transport, language support, disability support, health and mental health support, and racism and discrimination.**
- 4. Ensure children and young people's views and experiences inform anti-racism policies and practices across schools, workplaces, the media and communities.**

Yours sincerely,



Helen Connolly

Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia

1. Focus on children and young people's rights and diverse experiences across all ages and stages of development.

Australia's current multicultural policy framework does not adequately acknowledge and respond to children and young people's specific circumstances. This is despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UNCRC both recognising that children are entitled to special care and assistance and require additional safeguards to adults.

I recommend that the Review Panel consider how policy can have an intentional focus on children and young people which:

- Gives effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
- Accounts for the diversity and complexity of children and young people's identities and experiences.
- Is designed with input from children and young people.
- Is tailored to different ages and stages of development.
- Provides for specialised responses for those who face additional barriers and impacts of pre-arrival experiences, including refugees and unaccompanied minors.
- Improves data collection and promotes research related to children and young people's specific experiences, to inform the development of age-appropriate programs and improve ability to measure impacts and outcomes.¹

Currently, Australia's Multicultural Statement does not specifically refer to children or young people. The National Multicultural Access and Equity Policy makes no meaningful mention of children and young people in relation to 'applying' the Policy's six commitments. There is no overarching plan or strategy to ensure a nationally consistent, coordinated and targeted approach to upholding the rights and meeting the needs of children and young people.

Although young people's experiences are distinct from those of adults and younger children, settlement programs and services tend to focus on adults and family groups. It is often assumed that adult-focused programs can be applied to young people.² There is growing recognition of the distinct needs of young people aged 12 to 24 years old in youth-specific programs and services. While this is welcome, the rights and needs of children aged under 12 years old require particular consideration.

Child- and youth-centred approaches are particularly important given that children and young people consistently make up a significant proportion of arrivals across all of Australia's migration streams. Children under 12 years old made up 28% of arrivals under the Humanitarian Program in 2016, while young people aged between 12 and 24 years accounted for 23% of humanitarian arrivals.³ In the 2020-21 financial year, 41.5% of all youth arrivals were of high school age (12-17 years old).⁴

Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are incredibly diverse, coming from many countries of origin, with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, family structures, gender identities and sexualities, socioeconomic circumstances and levels of education, work experience and English proficiency. Those born outside of

Australia arrive at all ages and stages of development and with a range of pre-arrival experiences and journeys. The diversity and complexity of people's identities is often 'flattened out' by broad terms such as 'culturally and linguistically diverse'.⁵

I want grownups to know...
"my family is not in this country"
– 7, female

I worry about...
"kid's like me whose country is in war"
– 9, female

"Kids want to be included. The government & world leaders hold our future, yet exclude us from shaping it. If we are to trust others, they should trust us and include us in what may very well shape our lives"
– 14 year old

"That we've experienced a lot of horrible stuff that affect our mental health. Not normal stuff like seeing people die, losing people we like because of war and worse stuff so we might act abit different in school some kids might be more violent than other. Instead of giving them consequences help them change these actions"
– 16, female

Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds can face a range of systemic barriers in accessing support and opportunities. These barriers add complexity to already important periods during childhood and adolescence and may be compounded by the impacts of trauma, as well as grief and loss associated with dislocation and separation from peers or family, or uncertainty regarding visa status. Particular challenges include:

- Experiencing racism and discrimination.
- Navigating transitions into a new schooling system and unfamiliar employment pathways, including the transition from specialist English language schools to 'mainstream' schools, sometimes with a history of disrupted or no formal education.
- Adjusting to a new language and culture, new relationships with peers, and unfamiliar social systems, laws and norms.
- Negotiating family and community expectations and obligations in an Australian cultural context that places high value on individual aspirations. Many young people have grown up in a cultural context where the wellbeing of the whole family and community is prioritised above individual aspirations.
- Developing identity and belonging and navigating new or changed family structures, responsibilities and relationships, as well as tensions arising from the issues listed above.

Children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds have a range of knowledge, skills and aspirations. They are highly motivated to embrace opportunities and participate in their communities. As such, it is important for policies and services to recognise and build on children and young people's strengths and aspirations.

To promote meaningful inclusion, policy must build cultural competency of systems and services and promote intercultural understanding and respect for cultural diversity across systems, including education systems from a young age. This recognises that social cohesion is a 'two way' process, and children and young people's sense of belonging depends on how supportive and welcoming environments, services and systems are. While children and young people want support with the English language, they also want their own languages and cultures to be respected. As one parent puts it, 'providing ESL is not enough for kids to feel part of community'.

Children and young people describe belonging as being heard, feeling safe and valued and seeing diversity respected and celebrated. They link their sense of belonging to their overall health and wellbeing, friendships, supportive role models and mentors, and opportunities to 'do things I'm interested in'. Others describe belonging in terms of being free from bullying, discrimination, judgment or violence (e.g. 'not being judged' or 'not being bashed').

"Community provides a foundation where young people are able to openly seek help. A strong community produces strong youth who will create an even stronger future. The help, communication of the community builds a strong foundation"

– 17, female

"Sport- soccer. Bring communities together. After match go get food, feels like a family, encourages each other to win"

– 17, male

"I'm happy because I have soon birthday but I'm sad that it will be without dad"

- 12, male

"They say they want change and they will make change, but its been years and we still see no changes"

– 16, female

"To give refugee and migrants the same opportunity instead of assuming and placing them in subjects and groups they aren't happy in – listen – understand – ask"

- 16, female

2. Give effect to the National Youth Settlement Framework (NYSF) and facilitate children and young people's active citizenship.

Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) developed the National Youth Settlement Framework (NYSF) in 2016 to equip policy makers and service providers with skills and knowledge to best support young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to thrive in Australia. The evidence-based national guide benchmarks good practice and was revised in 2020 with updated tools to support the framework in practice.

Although the NYSF is primarily focused on youth (ages 12-24 years) and settlement, it also provides a foundation for the development and design of policies and services that support all children and young people regardless of where they were born or their age. As MYAN highlight:

there is a need to take a long-term view of settlement that goes beyond Federally-funded (settlement) services during the first five years to how the broader systems and supports facilitated social cohesion and empower young people to become active citizens.⁶

The Review Panel should consider the policy settings required to give effect to the NYSF. The NYSF understands 'active citizenship' as the optimal outcome for youth settlement, and a fundamental right of children and young people embedded in key articles of the UNCRC. Active citizenship encompasses concepts of participation, power, agency, identity and belonging, and refers to 'the formal and informal ways that young people engage and contribute to the community and broader society'.⁷

Importantly, active citizenship applies to all children and young people regardless of formal citizenship status in Australia. Facilitating positive outcomes across the intersecting domains of active citizenship – economic participation, social participation, civic participation and personal wellbeing – is the responsibility of all sectors and services, including health, education, training and employment, housing, justice, and sport and recreation.

The Review Panel should consider key opportunities to address structural barriers to employment identified by young people, including:

- Recognition of pre-arrival qualifications and support to re-establish qualifications.
- Information about pathways, and workplace rights and laws.
- Transport support, such as learner driver programs.
- Support to build peer and professional networks and 'bridging' social capital.
- Targeted employment readiness programs, including workplace-specific English language programs.
- Targeted support to address challenges associated with disrupted or minimal previous formal education, including particular barriers for those who arrive as older teenagers who have no schooling in Australia.
- Less temporary visas.

- Targeted traineeships and apprenticeships and support for further education and training pathways.

The Review Panel should also consider reforms that promote children and young people's social and civic participation, including increasing:

- Participation in sport, recreation and activities.
- Access to comprehensive sex education and sexual health services.
- Financial literacy support and life skills programs.
- Opportunities to connect with peers, neighbours and people from across generations, share traditions, and feel safe practicing their cultures.

3. Address systemic barriers to participation and inclusion, including in relation to poverty, transport, language support, disability support, health and mental health support, and racism and discrimination.

Facilitating positive outcomes across all domains of active citizenship depends on addressing the following systemic barriers to participation and inclusion:

- **The multidimensional impacts of poverty.** Poverty impacts children and young people's social connections and participation in education, employment and sporting or social activities. Policies should consider the intersection of poverty and:
 - Unstable, temporary, and unsafe housing.
 - Food insecurity.
 - Limited digital access or inclusion.
 - Structural barriers to employment.
 - Costs associated with going to school⁸ and transport.
 - Prohibitive eligibility requirements for people on particular visa types that limit access to housing support, income support, healthcare and other key services. This increases the risk of children and young people experiencing family breakdown, homelessness, exploitation and disengagement from the wider community.
- **Transport barriers.** This includes barriers associated with the cost of transport, limited information about public transport, and limited support to obtain a driver's license or access to a car. Transport-related barriers disproportionately impact people living in regional areas.
- **Language support.** Young people describe English language skills as one of the most important aspects of belonging. They describe the challenges associated with a lack of language support, particularly for those with parents who have limited English.
- **Disability support.** Newly arrived children and young people face barriers to disability support, including where there are assumptions about language barriers rather than recognition of developmental delays or disability. There can also be system reluctance to diagnose older young people and limited information for families. Lack of support leads to disengagement in all systems.

- **Mental health support.** Key barriers include stigma and shame associated with seeking support, and low levels of understanding of the support available. There is a need for early child- and youth-focused support that is culturally safe and supports families to understand mental health. Young people, families and service providers should be engaged to design and pilot ideas that address the barriers to help-seeking.
- **Health support.** Children, young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, including lack of culturally safe services and workforce development, limited information to navigate system, and limited access to Medicare. Health outcomes depend on education, employment, housing and social and civic participation, in addition to access to services.
- **Limited information for families.** Children, young people and families need tailored communication of information to understand rights and key services and systems, including education, health and public transport systems, and workplaces and employment pathways.
- **Racism and discrimination** underpin all systemic barriers and have wide-ranging impacts on health, educational and social outcomes across the life course (See Recommendation 4).

“helping refugees to get houses so quicker, helping some homelessness in need, sharing our cultures with others, helping young people to get jobs & understand we are different to each other”

– 15, female

“Coming from regional SA, we don’t have very much exposure to bigger, better opportunities and we have to travel at least seven hours to get to the next major city (Adelaide), which costs a lot of money. So I think we should have more government help to fund learning opportunities... or just in general.”

– 16, male

“Make/create sport, book & other community events to bring young people from different cultural background to come together and share and learn”

– 16, female

“When making laws, taking refugees into account, put refugees in Australian Curriculum to educate young people about refugee”

– 16, female

Consistent with the NYSF ‘good practice capabilities’, responses should also emphasise:

- **The right of children and young people to participate in decision-making that affects their lives (Article 12 of the UNCRC).** Beyond ‘ticking a box’, meaningful participation equips young people with skills, knowledge and resources to effectively inform policy and services, with benefits for individuals and communities.⁹ There are a range of good practice examples that involve young people as leaders, facilitators

and mentors, and engage young people, families and service providers to pilot innovative strategies and ideas.

- **Family-aware** approaches that recognise the importance of family relationships in children and young people's lives, wherever they are located. Young people report that their parents 'all changed when moved to Australia' and that there is 'no support for parents'. Family-aware approaches provide information and support for parents and families, and support and prioritise family reunion as protective factors for young people also reducing isolation and empowering families.
- **Collaboration and coordination.** Children and families are navigating complex, unfamiliar and often fragmented support systems. There is currently limited capacity for communication and coordination across services and sectors, sometimes due to different funding models, compliance measures and performance indicators. Australia's multicultural framework should recognise that children and young people's outcomes are not only affected by the type of services offered, but also the extent to which these services are linked.

"I applied for work online like 7 places with my real name vs english name.
The response from the job was very different"

– 16, female

"Racism happens everywhere. We've tried so hard to educate communities and individuals on racism but nothing has really worked. So whats next? I think we need to educate primary school students to start them young"

– 15, female

"I reckon people should be more open- minded not to believe the media and to really meet people. Kindergarten school should show traditional culture days like: Eid, Diwali and more so they know about them! To have a citizenship and permanent so kids enjoy in school so they can see their family members ... education, be on TV, be more diversity, maybe it should be taught in schools"

– 15, female

The world would be better if... "there wasn't any racism going on and people with different backgrounds can play the sport they like without getting racially abused [racially abused]."

– 12, male

4. Ensure children and young people's views and experiences inform anti-racism policies and practices across schools, workplaces, the media and communities.

Experiencing racism and discrimination is a key barrier to social inclusion and cultural safety, undermining children and young people's sense of belonging, identity, relationships and citizenship. The work of the Australian Human Rights Commission towards the

development of a new national anti-racism framework is welcome. It is critical that anti-racism policies and practices are informed by children and young people's experiences and perspectives.

Racism is an everyday reality for many children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in Australia. The first national study of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds found almost half of multicultural young people aged 15 to 25 years reported experiencing some form of discrimination in the previous 12 months (48.7%), with two thirds of these young people reporting experiences of racial discrimination (65.7%).¹⁰

Despite its prevalence, children and young people highlight that racism is 'not talked about', is 'not seen as an issue' and 'does not get dealt with'. Responses to racism tend to focus more on individuals rather than systems, and evidence suggests there is a tendency to discuss racism with children reactively rather than proactively, if at all.¹¹

Children and young people describe being treated differently, singled out or seen 'less as people' and 'lesser than' their peers by teachers, strangers, peers, prospective employers as well as people in the media and other positions of power. They report being made fun of based on assumptions and stereotypes, including about their clothing, appearance, the food they eat, the level of English or their accent, how much money their family has or the kind of jobs they should pursue. They also describe the ways in which some teachers perpetuate racist stereotypes, language and behaviour, fail to protect students from discrimination or actively protect students who have said or done something racist.

"Racism does affect us. It affects our mental and physical health. Sometime, people are doing "something" to show "appreciation" but most of the time it just turns out into mocking"

– 15, female

"It does not get dealt the right way and there are not alot of good places to talk about it"

– 15, male

"When student says something racist remarks and you call them out they just say "sorry" & continue to say those remark again next day"

– 16, female

"There have been multiple instances where there has been a racist incident between student where the offender will get no punishment and the person who stands up against the racist behavior will get suspend. Our principal loves to have inspirational speeches but actions speak much louder than words"

– 15, female

Racism takes many forms and is prevalent in the very systems and services that are critical to young people's wellbeing and development, including in education settings.

Although schools cannot address racism alone, schools have a critical role in influencing children and young people's attitudes, views and behaviour, as well as their identity formation, self-esteem and sense of belonging. It would be a missed opportunity to overlook children and young people's experiences of racism in schools, as well as their suggestions for ensuring school environments are free from racism and discrimination.

Children and young people highlight the inadequacy of responses to racism when it is reported, noting it is generally not taken seriously or ignored. They also report that those who speak out against racism will be punished or excluded while there are no consequences for those being racist. In some cases, a lack of action and accountability from responsible adults means students 'will take it into their own hands'. Young people have described being suspended for 'speaking their first language' or for 'sticking up for yourself'.

Where schools are not equipped to understand and support children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, responses tend to be punitive and exclusionary. Service providers and educators report that some children are being suspended regularly from primary schools without modified programs. The negative cumulative impact of experiences of racism, exclusion and marginalisation can lead to disengagement and withdrawal from school, employment and social activities and further isolate young people from social connections.

Children and young people want schools to 'create an environment where students do not have to live in fear of being called racial slurs by both teachers and student'. In particular, they are calling for:

- Education for everyone about racism from a young age, with the provision of more opportunities to talk about racism and understand its different forms, as well as the impacts and consequences of racism.
- School-wide policies and programs, including anti-bullying policies that actively challenge racism and take it seriously 'instead of just blowing it off' or viewing racism as an individual student issue.
- A diverse curriculum that promotes respect and embeds anti-racism, including migrant history, different languages, cultures, and 'bigger things' happening around the world, as well as more about Australian culture.
- Investment in cultural competency of staff, including to understand the impacts of trauma, challenge assumptions and listen to children and young people from diverse backgrounds 'before jumping to conclusions' or 'always believing the white kids instead of the refugees'.
- Support from staff and volunteers from a range of cultural backgrounds.
- Celebration of diverse cultures and cultural safety as part of everyday policies, practices, attitudes and behaviours rather than limited to 'special days or events'.
- Safe and inclusive spaces, programs and activities to support children and young people with friendships and homework.

Children and young people I have spoken with also identified a range of other opportunities to prevent and address racism and discrimination across communities, which I encourage the Review Panel to consider:

- More positive news stories and media representations of children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Media plays a powerful role in 'setting a frame', which is often negative and criminalises young people or reinforces stereotypes. As one young person noted, 'no one seems to care when we do good things'.
- Building cultural competency of employers, work experience providers, employment services and real estate agents and housing providers to eliminate assumptions based on names, appearances, cultural or religious background that impact hiring practices and housing provision in favour of white Australians.
- Promoting cultural safety in sporting environments and sports clubs, with a focus on addressing the behaviour of adult role models, including parents, coaches and other staff.

"Create safe spaces for them to believe in their abilities and not dumb them down. To further educate teachers and be more inclusive, create diversity in staff. Talk about matters going on in the bigger world"

- 15, female

"Having more diverse teachers so we have more teachers we are comfortable with, and that can relate to us and our experiences"

- 16, female

"learn more about your language and other language. Get more points in year 12 if you speak more than 2 language at school"

- 14, male

"Educate everyone about different culture. Teachers should have seminars/workshop about different cultures, so they understand other culture/students more and bring this new mindset. Draw the line between jokes and racial comments disguised as jokes."

- 16, female

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- ¹ Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia. *If we don't count it... it doesn't count! Towards Consistent National Data Collection and Reporting on Cultural, Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity*. (2020). <https://fecca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CALD-DATA-ISSUES-PAPER-FINAL2.pdf>.
- ² MYAN. *National Youth Settlement Framework*. 2nd ed. (2016). <https://myan.org.au/resources/national-youth-settlement-framework/>.
- ³ MYAN. 2016-2017 Youth Settlement Trends in Australia. https://myan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/myan-youth-settlement-trends_2016-2017-final2.pdf.
- ⁴ MYAN 2021. Data Snapshot on Youth Settlement Trends 2020-21. <https://myan.org.au/resources/data-snapshot-on-youth-settlement-trends-2020-21/>.
- ⁵ Prentice, Trish. 'Why call me that?' Reflections on labels in a diverse nation. (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2023). <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/publications/essays/reflections-on-labels>.
- ⁶ MYAN. Submission to Discussion Paper: Next steps to improve Australia's settlement and integration of refugees. (2022). <https://myan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/settlement-discussion-paper-response-myan-australia.pdf>.
- ⁷ Centre for Multicultural Youth. *Active Citizenship, Participation and Belonging: Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Victoria*. (Carlton: CMY, 2018). https://www.cmy.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CMY-Active-Citizenship_0.pdf.
- ⁸ Connolly, Helen. Commissioner for Children and Young People South Australia. Spotlight on the True Cost of Going to School. (October 2020). <https://www.ccyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Spotlight-on-the-True-Cost-of-Going-to-School.pdf>.
- ⁹ Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia. *Not 'Just ticking a box': Youth participation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds*. (2018). <https://myan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/youthparticipationfinalinteractive.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Wyn, Johanna, Rimi Khan, and Babak Dadvand. *Multicultural Youth Australia Census Status Report 2017-18*. (Melbourne: Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, 2018). https://education.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/2972036/MY-Aust-Report-17-18.pdf.
- ¹¹ Priest, Naomi, Jessica Walton, Fiona White, Emma Kowal, Brandi Fox, and Yin Paradies. "'You're not born being racist are you?' Discussing racism with primary aged-children." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 19, no. 4 (2016): 808-834. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2014.946496>.