

MYAN NSW Discussion Paper
Emerging issues in education for young people from refugee backgrounds in NSW
August 2012

Introduction

The need for coordinated and more comprehensive education support for young people from refugee backgrounds is consistently identified by the Multicultural Youth Affairs Network (MYAN) NSW members as a priority issue. This discussion paper seeks to highlight some of the issues discussed at MYAN NSW meetings and identify recommended actions to improve education support to young people from refugee backgrounds in NSW.

About the MYAN NSW

The Multicultural Youth Affairs Network NSW is a Network of services committed to multiculturalism and improving the opportunities and outcomes for multicultural young people in NSW. The purpose of the MYAN is to coordinate information and undertake action on issues affecting multicultural young people and their families, and to develop appropriate policies, strategies and resources that address these issues at the local, regional and state-wide levels. The Network is made up of workers from the youth, multicultural, education and training sectors and local government who currently support multicultural young people and their families. The MYAN also seeks representation and input from multicultural young people

About students from refugee backgrounds in NSW

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).

Why do these students require additional support?

There are a number of reasons why young people from refugee backgrounds require support to fully participate in and access education upon arrival in Australia. However, it is important to remember that every young person from a refugee background has had their own journey and experience and that their need for support will vary. There are two main reasons why additional support is required in the context of education. These are:

- **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 Intensive English Centres (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.

Current supports available for young people from refugee backgrounds in NSW

In NSW there are a number of ways that education support is being provided to students from refugee backgrounds. Firstly, the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) offers the Refugee Support Program, which supports students from refugee backgrounds in high settlement areas. Secondly, Migrant Resource Centre's and youth services in high settlement areas often offer homework help programs and computer labs to students. Thirdly, libraries in high settlement areas have identified that these students have particular needs and also often run homework support and library orientation. Finally, some mentoring and homework help programs are provided by Universities for school students and also by the organisations committed to numeracy and literacy.

While these programs all provide essential services to young people from refugee backgrounds, generally the needs of these student's is seen to outweigh the level of support provided. Often the delivery of programs is also area specific and ad hoc, in that they may be funded/ provided for a limited period of time, and some areas have all the services and programs listed above and others maybe only have one source of support for students. In this way, there is a lack of coordination and consistency in education support for these students across NSW.

Emerging Issues

Throughout 2012 the MYAN NSW has been identifying issues of concern regarding appropriate education support for young people from refugee backgrounds. Provided below is a summary of these issues and the actions the MYAN NSW has taken so far.

- **Support for young people from refugee backgrounds in the context of education reform**

As part of the NSW Government proposed NSW Department of Education and Communities, Office of Schools, Functional Realignment the Multicultural Programs Unit has been dissolved and positions within the Refugee Support Unit are under threat.

The MYAN NSW has opposed the proposal by the Office of Schools, Functional Realignment to reduce the number of positions and programs within the Multicultural Programs Unit and the Community Languages Schools Programs, as this will negatively impact on support for teachers and schools and adversely affect the learning outcome of students.

The MYAN NSW is particularly concerned about the reduction of positions within the Refugee Support Program, which is an essential and significant program which helps newly arrived young people from refugee backgrounds adjust to the Australian school system in NSW.

While the MYAN NSW understands that the localization of decisions at the school level is highly beneficial in some areas, it is clear that the delivery of programs such as the Refugee Support Program requires maintaining coordination at the regional level in order to avoid duplication and share best practice. The MYAN NSW believes that the policy of localization for schools generally is not mutually exclusive to maintaining regional coordination for specific programs.

An example of why regional coordination is so important is illustrated through a position such as Senior Education Officer, ESL New Arrivals Program (Rural and Regional). This position provides frontline advice and support to schools enrolling migrant and refugee students in regional areas and provides professional learning, mentoring support and resources for teachers of these students.

The potential loss of positions will significantly impact on teachers in schools enrolling ESL and refugee students in rural, regional and remote areas, including the Western Region, and their capacity to meet the complex educational and settlement needs of these students. In particular, as many of the teachers providing ESL support in rural, regional and remote areas do not have ESL qualifications or experience, the loss of this position may have a considerable impact on the quality of the ESL teaching support that refugee and migrant students in rural, regional and remote areas are able to access.

In addition, the MYAN NSW is concerned that if support for students from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds becomes the responsibility of an individual Principal, support to these students is wholly reliant on the Principal's knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by students from refugee backgrounds and their willingness to provide specialized assistance at their school. In essence, support for students from refugee backgrounds could then be entirely reliant on the personal choice of a Principal.

The role of Refugee Support Program and the Multicultural Programs Unit at the Department of Education and Communities is a significant one. The MYAN NSW is concerned that without

targeted and specialized assistance to students with English as a second language and who are from diverse backgrounds, the NSW education system will fail to provide the support these students need to succeed and achieve positive educational and life outcomes.

Action Taken

In response to the proposed reform the MYAN NSW has written to both the NSW Minister for Education and the NSW Minister for Citizenship and Communities and who also holds the youth portfolio, to raise the above concerns regarding the reform. No response has been received to date (August 2012).

Recommended Action

The MYAN NSW urge the NSW Department of Education and Communities to consider the potential impact of the Office of Schools, Functional Realignment potential impact on students from refugee background in the light of the level of support that they require to access and remain engaged in education.

- **Coordinated Homework Support Programs**

Members from the MYAN NSW have expressed frustration at the ad hoc and fragmented nature of homework support programs in NSW and would like to see a more coordinated approach to homework support such as it is currently provided in Victoria. For example, the Learning Beyond the Bell program in Victoria aims to increase the consistency and accessibility of Out of School Hours Learning Support Programs (OSHSs), and in particular to increase the connectedness of refugee and migrant young people to school and the community, and to improve attitudes to learning. Funded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Learning Beyond the Bell program supports and provides co-ordination to OSLSs, including providing volunteer training and program management support.

This level of support sees over 300 homework support clubs operating across Victoria using standardised resources which are centrally located and accessible via the programs website. In addition, the program is evaluated annually and evaluation resources are provided to each home club to evaluate their effectiveness overall. The Victorian Government through ongoing funding supports this program provided through the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Currently there is no equivalent program in NSW.

Potential Actions for MYAN NSW to follow up

MYAN NSW members also suggested that:

- There is a need to map homework support clubs in Sydney and NSW to see where they are and what they do.
- That homework clubs should be located at schools rather than youth centres to make them more accessible to students.

Recommended Action

The MYAN NSW would like to see a coordinated approach to homework support particularly for students from refugee backgrounds to allow them to 'catch up' and overcome barriers to

education participation that occur due to lack of comprehensive and coordinated support. The MYAN NSW would recommend that the NSW Department of Education and Communities look to the Victorian model for Out of School Hours Learning Support Programs to better assist refugee students and ensure they receive the help they need regardless of where they live in NSW.

In addition, it is recommended that youth services that run homework services look to partner with local schools to locate programs at schools.

Addition Recommendations for Improved Education Support

The MYAN NSW also recommends that:

- Individual Learning Support Plans that are tailored through the Learning and Support Faculty could be used with students from refugee backgrounds to bridge the gaps in education.
- Students from refugee backgrounds would benefit from increased support at libraries through a designated tutor employed by the Council.

Ongoing Issues

The MYAN NSW raised a number of key issues in a 2011 position paper on education, which remain relevant in 2012. These are:

- **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. There are also big education gaps between Intensive English Centre's and mainstream high schools, in that students are usually overwhelmed by the transition between IECs and high school.

- **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 from 2011

In the MYAN NSW 2011 Election Platform and Position Paper on *Education for refugee and newly arrived young people* the MYAN NSW recommended that the following actions were

taken 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 allocations, 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 now NSW Department of Education and Communities (then NSW Department of Education and Training) by publicizing an annual report on key activities with refugee young people.

These recommendations remain relevant for 2012.

Summary

This discussion paper has presented emerging and ongoing issues faced in NSW regarding the education support needs of young people from refugee backgrounds. While some supports do exist and offer help to students from refugee backgrounds further coordination and consistency across NSW is required to ensure that where you live does not restrict the level of support you receive. The MYAN NSW is concerned about the new education reforms in NSW and how that may affect the support students from refugee backgrounds receive. The MYAN NSW would also like to see a state-wide coordinated homework support program such as the Victorian Learning Beyond the Bell program. Overall, the MYAN NSW believe that if young people from refugee backgrounds receive an appropriate level of education support both inside and outside of school hours then their opportunities for full inclusion and participation in the Australian community is increased and can be realised.

References

NSW Department of Education and Training, 2010, Refugee Support Strategy Key Initiatives – 2010.

NSW Department of Education and Training, 2005, Cultural Diversity and Community Relations Policy: Multicultural education in schools,
https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_serv/equity/comm_rela/PD20050234.shtml?level=Schools&categories=Schools|Access+%26+equity|Multicultural

MYAN NSW (2011) *Education for refugee and newly arrived young people – Position Paper*, Youth Action and Policy Association NSW Inc, Sydney.

Refugee Council of Australia, July 2010. Finding the Right Time and Place, Exploring post compulsory education and training pathways for young people from refugee backgrounds in NSW, <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/resources/reports.html>.