

Victorian Multicultural Commission

Submission to the Victorian Government on
The Victorian Youth Strategy

Summary

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Government's Youth Strategy (the Strategy).

The VMC acknowledges the Victorian Government's commitment *'to creating a Victoria where all young people are healthy and safe, and empowered to contribute to the issues that affect them. We want every single young person to have equitable access to opportunities and support to participate fully in the social, economic and civic life of our state.'*

This submission represents the voices, experiences and concerns of diverse young Victorians from multicultural and multifaith backgrounds by identifying issues and a range of recommendations in response to the Strategy's outcomes outlined in the discussion paper, including:

1. Victorian young people are healthy and well, mentally and physically
2. Victorian young people actively participate in learning, education and training
3. Victorian young people are economically active and contribute to the economy
4. Victorian young people are connected to culture, community and civic life
5. Victorian young people are safe, experience equality of opportunity and are treated fairly; and
6. Government, community services and the youth sector are accessible, appropriate and coordinated, and respond to young people's evolving needs.

This submission is informed by community feedback collated through various community engagement platforms including consultations with young people from multicultural and multifaith backgrounds and through VMC's Regional Advisory Councils. The VMC also ran a small focus group session to explore targeted opportunities for success for the Victorian Youth Policy and how to strengthen inclusion and diversity across broad policy matters.

In its advocacy efforts, the VMC is uniquely positioned to advocate on the needs of grassroots community organisations and provides ongoing feedback across government to ensure that issues are addressed appropriately and in a timely manner. This is to ensure that young people from multicultural and faith communities have equal opportunity in accessing and thriving in an inclusive Victorian society. Informed by community consultations and commissioned research, the VMC is conscious of the systemic challenges and barriers facing multicultural youth, many of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In March 2020, the Centre for Multicultural Youth highlighted the unique and sometimes complex challenges facing multicultural youth:

"CALD youth are a highly diverse group and their specific issues and challenges may differ depending on the particular cultural group with which they identify; the number of years they have been in Australia; their pathways both to Australia and once residing in Australia, and the level of community and family support they receive once they are living in Australia. This is particularly the case for those CALD youth from a refugee background."



This is especially pertinent given Victoria's cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, where:

- 48% of Victoria's youth population were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas, a 4% increase over the last decade; and
- More than one in four young people in Victoria (27 per cent) spoke a Language Other Than English (LOTE) at home.

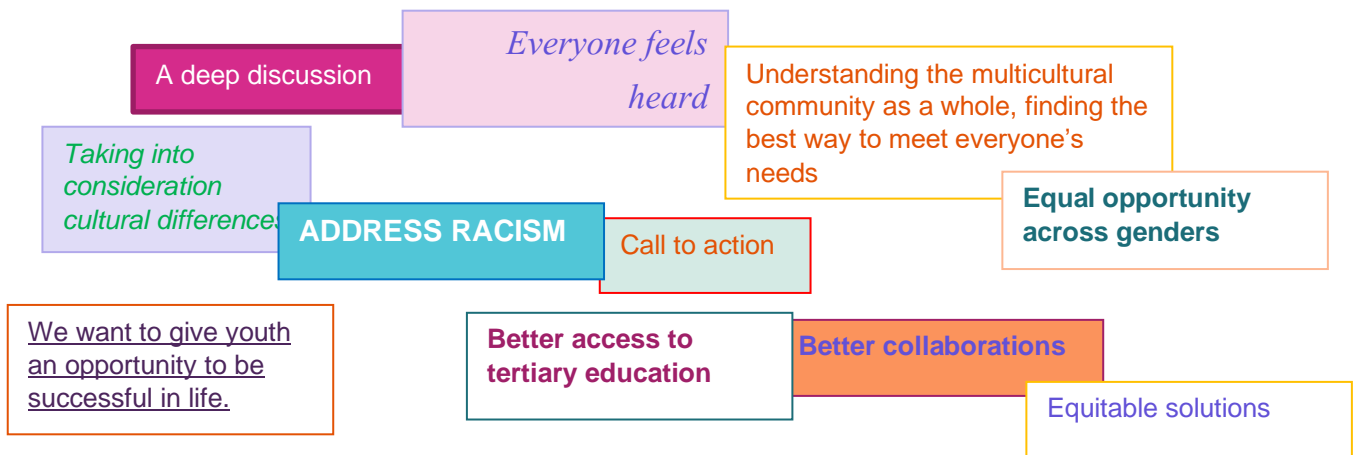
(Source: Centre for Multicultural Youth, A Young and Multicultural Victoria: the 2016 Census, 2020)

This data demonstrates that multicultural youth *are* mainstream. Similarly, to other submissions made across government, the VMC strongly advocates for a whole-of-government approach to multicultural affairs by prioritising cultural responsiveness and inclusiveness of its services to be embedded in appropriate supports and infrastructure. This will ensure meaningful and sustainable outcomes for our youth across all facets of life.

The Victorian Youth Strategy has an opportunity to set a definitive blueprint, not only for the future of Victoria's youth, but for the development, design and delivery of all government policies and services in our multicultural society. The Victorian Youth Portfolio intersects with many other areas and government portfolios – from education to employment, mental health, family violence, younger adults through all transition points, metropolitan to regional Victoria, and must move beyond passive acknowledgement to active embracement of our multicultural reality.

Multicultural youth informed recommendations

- We asked multicultural youth what success looks like to them and they responded:



We asked, 'do these outcomes need a multicultural approach?'

- Participants **AGREED** that the Strategy needs a *multicultural and inclusive lens across all issues impacting the lives of young people.*

We asked, 'if government gave you the money, what else would you need from government?'

They responded:

- Support to promote our services and have faith in what we do!
- Resources and support for the service delivery sector.
- Empower young people in decision making.
- Build leadership, co-design and co-deliver projects.

We asked, 'What can community youth organisations bring to the table?'

They responded:

- Heart
- Representation is key to addressing specific community issues
- A unique understanding of a range of cultures and diversity of ideas
- Specific knowledge about an area of culture
- Connection/relevance to community



We asked, 'How are grassroots organisations currently engaged by government?'

They responded:

- Sometimes a bit shallow.... only for a certain amount of time, or only when it could benefit the government.
- I don't know if they communicate. They need to come together and discuss these issues. They need to work together.
- Need for more meaningful engagement with young people.

We asked, 'What does successful collaboration between government and grassroots community organisation look like? Tangible solutions? Visions?'

They responded:

- Real, honest engagement...continue to communicate with us.
- Communication that leads to actions; long term investments.
- Put multicultural youth at the centre of everything they do
- Address racism in a practical, measurable way; the rise of the right wing is a concerning trend.
- Involve more cultural and gender diversity in popular media.
- Feedback loops; manage expectations; ensuring value in the engagement for both sides; regular and better consultations and engagement; improve grant processes.



VMC's evidence-base findings that respond to outcomes

Whilst numerous reports have well documented the six outcome areas identified in the discussion paper, young people from multicultural communities in Victoria are still underrepresented and experiencing challenges in achieving them.

This next section responds to the outcomes and is supported by VMC's evidence base of collated data and community feedback.

Outcome One - *Victorian young people are healthy and well, mentally and physically*

It is widely documented that young people from multicultural backgrounds face a vast range of barriers to accessing services regarding their health that are different to the experience of Australian-born young people.

This is because migrants and refugees experience unique and complex challenges in navigating the settlement experience, for some cohorts this may include: stigma attached to help-seeking; distrust of services; cultural perceptions of health problems; lack of understanding of health issues and services available; and, lack of in-language resources and culturally safe supports available.¹

The VMC recently highlighted in its *Submission to the Royal Commission on Mental Health* that mental health issues facing young people from multicultural communities and within multicultural LGBTIQ+ communities are of major concern. The submission notes that intergenerational challenges leading to lack of support for many young people from their families, communities and available networks is still a work in progress in some cohorts. A combination of factors caused by the pandemic inducing having to return home due to loss of employment and limited access to existing services, have highlighted the gaps in our existing systems in supporting young people from multicultural communities.

Multicultural LGBTIQ+ communities have been particularly vulnerable during COVID-19 and recovery with reports around increased family violence, poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes, increase in self-harm and marginalisation. The VMC has heard reports of many young people who have become unemployed are returning to live with their families and had to "return to the closet".

What we know of mental and physical health and multicultural youth

- Need for increased access to mental health supports that address specific barriers facing multicultural youth including; English language barriers, lack of in-language resources, taboos, stigma and stereotypes.
- Need to understand that multicultural young people have different needs, mentally and physically, due to cultural differences. For example, in some cultures mental illness is considered a curse not an illness, and we need to work with young people to manage their health. Reports of increased intergenerational issues as a result of families living together during COVID-19 lockdown.

- Young people from multicultural communities are not connecting with mental health providers within an ‘Anglocentric’ health system; some of the language used and concepts are very ‘euro-centric’.
- Past migration, trauma experiences, cultural shock and stressors linked with settlement processes significantly impact on the mental health of newly arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.
- Experiences of racism and racial discrimination are significantly linked to adverse health and wellbeing outcomes in young people.
- Critical need to support multicultural LGBTIQ+ communities during COVID-19 and recovery with particular concern around increased family violence, poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes, increase in self-harm and marginalisation; with reports many young people becoming unemployed are returning to live with their families and “return to the closet”.
- Some young people are reluctant to visit their family doctor for issues such as contraception, mental health or gender related concerns. We need to provide better health options for young people so that they can access healthcare without fear.
- Need for culturally appropriate mental health programs.
- Youth need access to healthcare so that they can be able to function as normal youth; they need holistic support.
- Lack of access to mental health services and supports available in VET/TAFE, private colleges and English schools.
- Young people live in at least two worlds where cultures, values can clash and intergenerational conflicts can exacerbate their mental and physical wellbeing.

Outcome Two - *Victorian young people actively participate in learning, education and training*

In 2018, the Department of Education and Training stated that as Year 12 completion, or its equivalent, has become the norm for learners in Victoria, the negative consequences for young people disengaging from school have exacerbated, increasing the risk and likelihood of a more challenging transition to employment or further study.

(Source: Department of Education and Training (2018), Summary of Statistics for Victorian Schools: July 2018)

What we know of learning, education and training and young people from multicultural backgrounds

- Lack of access to mental health services and supports available in VET/TAFE, private colleges and English schools.
- Need English language classes at TAFEs offered at different levels.
- Need assistance for non-English speaking students through homework clubs and after school clubs in a culturally respectful way.
- Need equal opportunities for quality education for communities of lower socio-economic status.
- Education is very important to youth; youth can understand the world and be capable of making good decisions.
- Need to focus on early age learning so that children don’t fall behind. Good foundation endears them through remaining years of education. The VMC’s submission into the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities* identified that:

- Strategic and systemic engagement of parents in early childhood is necessary – more engaged and informed parents can continue the support and learning facilitated in early learning environments in the home.
- To increase and improve effective early childhood engagement with CALD communities, there is a need to improve the data we collect about service users, to strategically target resources and support to those who are underutilising the services.
- Improved data collection would also support improved outcome measures on the engagement of CALD communities – which could be supported through longitudinal studies that assist and document the individual, family and community benefits of early childhood engagement.
- We need trusted community leaders and representatives who can facilitate engagement and trust in mainstream service providers – but we also need to provide cultural competency training to the staff who provide those services, so that all early childhood services are inclusive and accessible.
- Existing early childhood programs that address the needs of CALD communities, such as VICSEG’s playgroups and the Community Hubs, are cost-effective options for that could be considered for future investment.
- Many young people may be the first of their family to go to university. There is a need for better options and education about university pathways. to give them an improved chance at having a better future.
- International students have the chance to integrate in and feel safe in the learning community.
- Educators to better understand cultural differences.
- Young people from emerging communities, those engaged with or leaving the justice system and those disconnected from family and/or their community, should be provided with tailored wrap-around supports to assist their re-engagement with education and training.

Outcome Three - *Victorian young people are economically active and contribute to the economy*

‘One of Victoria’s greatest strengths lies in the richness of experiences, creativity and expertise of our young people from multicultural backgrounds. 2020 has been no easy feat for Victorians, of which, young Victorians from diverse backgrounds and local businesses have been hit especially hard... The impact that COVID-19 is having and will continue to have on employment of young diverse Victorians is paramount.’ – extracted from ‘Meet me in the Middle Report: Facilitating the Employment of Young Multicultural People in Post Covid-19 Victoria,’ Adam Clarke Consulting 2020.

As part of the its Community Support Fund² the VMC commissioned the report *Meet me in the Middle Report: Facilitating the Employment of Young Multicultural People in Post Covid-19 Victoria* to investigate challenges facing multicultural youth within the current and post COVID-19 Victorian employment market. The report identifies opportunities and recommendations on targeted supports to ensure that multicultural youth can secure meaningful and sustainable employment in the future.

COVID-19 has presented an opportunity for the job market and industries to redefine procurement and recruitment procedures. Our recommendations support workplace policies and programs that focus on cultural diversity, inclusion and workplace equity to ensure that multicultural youth are protected from workplace discrimination and have equal opportunity to reach their full potential in their working careers.



What we know of employment and young people from multicultural backgrounds

- Young people of multicultural backgrounds have had difficulties entering meaningful employment despite having qualifications and skills. Barriers to accessing employment include: low-English language proficiency, inaccessible driving programs to gain drivers licence, limited transport options, limited employment pathways for university graduates and TAFE students, limited financial literacy and education/awareness about work rights in the Australian context, cultural bias in entering workforce and experiences of racial discrimination.
- Impacts of precarious and casual work force on young people, including lack of job security and heightened risk of manipulation.
- Impacts of financial stress during and post Covid-19, due to lower potential level of savings accessible in a time of crisis compared to older age groups.
- Need to increase job readiness for young people, including upskill and increase capability around recruitment processes and psychometric tests.
- Limited employment opportunities in regional areas mean that young people tend to migrate to metro or interstate areas with greater prospects, however those that remain in regional areas are settling for lower skilled jobs.
- Need to work with employers and industries to change workforce culture to embrace and increase workforce diversity.
- More scholarship/internship offerings to support young people to be upskilled, gain work experience and be job ready.
- Education around safe travelling as well as better assistance in learner driver courses as some parents are unable to drive.
- Anecdotal evidence of workplace exploitation.
- Will post-graduate students have access to work opportunities?
- Multicultural youth have limited access to professional networks.
- If the job market becomes more competitive, will discrimination be more of an issue?

Outcome Four - *Victorian young people are connected to culture, community and civic life*

Research shows that there are established benefits of community participation for both young people and those experiencing hardship. For example, volunteering has been found to be advantageous for young people who are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged as the engagement can enhance social development and political awareness and can lead to a more positive outlook on future successes.

What we know of connections to culture, community and civic life and young people from multicultural backgrounds

- Impacts of Covid-19 restrictions and isolation on young people; loss of identity, loss of sense of purpose, being separated from school, friends and the things that keep them connected.
- Need to increase young people's voices and experiences in the media.
- Include young people's voices in decision making processes and the development of policies and programs that impact them.

- E–advocacy is important as young people can see themselves in the narrative to address issues that impact them.
- Importance of information sharing and the role of community leaders reaching out to existing networks.
- Need for young people to disseminate information to other young people.
- Need to build capacity of young people to advocate for their communities.
- Exploring layers of identity; ethnicity, faith, age, gender and sexuality.
- Need to increase availability of online programs for multicultural youth to strengthen skills, showcase talent and build social cohesion.
- Importance of bilingual schools in preserving and promoting languages and cultural heritage.
- Need for more community leaders, young role models and mentoring programs.
- Increased awareness of multiculturalism and diversity amongst the general population.
- Need for respectful relationships and inclusion to strengthen sense of belonging; so that young people don't feel pressured to change; *culture should always be respected*.
- More government funded cultural festivals run by young people for young people.
- Opportunities to learn life skills through sport.
- *'I have had so many young participants want to be more involved in their culture this year'*.

Outcome Five- *Victorian young people are safe, experience equality of opportunity and are treated fairly*

What we know of safety, experiencing equality of opportunity and fairness for young people from multicultural backgrounds

- *'Unfortunately, this is not true for multicultural youth at all....'*
- Need for increased protections against racial discrimination and unity amongst communities to call out racism.
- Data on racism in schools is lacking due to poor data collection. 'Racism' is not listed as a category of complaint for schools. Racism is often reported under "bullying category" as this was how the system of reporting was set up. Schools do need to have a better understanding of what cultural/faith discrimination looks like.
- Parents and students may be fearful raising issues around discrimination or not knowing how to raise it.
- The Department of Education and Training relies on schools to identify racism, call it out and report incidents to the department. Schools are ultimately responsible to deal with racial incidents. Data on bullying does not identify the root cause, hence the reasons that trigger such behaviour are unknown. It is unclear if the behaviour is due to for example religious reasons, race related, peer pressure or body image.
- Community mentioned incidents of real and perceived discrimination in a variety of areas including policing, the media and in the education system that led to a reduced sense of belonging, lower levels of mental health and poorer employment attainment.
- Some intersectionality cohorts without strong connections within their multicultural communities, particularly within LGBTIQ+ multicultural communities are facing complex issues around sexuality, religion and social norms, which add another layer of vulnerability.

- Critical need to support multicultural LGBTIQ+ communities during COVID-19 and recovery with particular concern around increased family violence, poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes, increase in self-harm and marginalisation; with reports many young people becoming unemployed are returning to live with their families and “return to the closet”.
- Multicultural young people avoid public places as they fear being targeted.
- Need for equal access to employment, education, health for all regardless of your surname.
- *‘Equality and opportunity for all’*.
- Young people fall victim to stereotypes from the very start which prevents them from seizing opportunities.

Outcome Six - Government, community services and the youth sector are accessible, appropriate and coordinated, and respond to young people’s evolving needs

What we know of accessibility, appropriateness and coordination of government, community service and youth services in responding to the needs of young people from multicultural backgrounds

- Need to consolidate supports for young people, i.e. a one stop shop model.
- Difficulty in accessing services due to inadequate public transport in regional areas.
- Low-English proficiency is a barrier to accessing online services such as MyGov.
- Lack of translators and support – going to Centrelink is a barrier for newly arrived communities.
- *‘Young people are losing hope in the system’*.
- Need for more culturally appropriate and respectful services for multicultural young people.
- Public servants and service providers should be trained on cultural competence/safety.
- Case management/client-focussed service delivery should be culturally appropriate to provide appropriate support.
- Utilising technology to engage young people.
- Invest and promote workforce diversity.
- Involve multicultural youth in co-design process.



About the Victorian Multicultural Commission

The Commission is an independent statutory body that strengthens cultural diversity in Victoria through consultation, advocacy, celebration and promotion. It is one of the main conduits between Victoria's multicultural communities and government.

Apart from hosting community-specific, issue-specific and place-based consultations, the Commission is informed by its:

- eight Regional Advisory Councils across Victoria (three metropolitan and five regional councils) with more than 250 members drawn from their respective local areas to represent their communities,
- the Multifaith Advisory Group, with representatives from more than 25 faith organisations and peak bodies, and
- the Multicultural Chamber of Commerce Group, with more than 30 community specific chambers of commerce and business sector representatives.

Since March 2020, the VMC has engaged extensively with Victoria's multicultural and faith communities, hosting in excess of thirty community roundtables, over twenty Regional Advisory Council meetings, co-chaired the North Melbourne Flemington and Yarra Public Housing Estates Working Groups, attended numerous community led consultations, co-hosted with the VEOHRC ten anti-racism seminars as well as an immense range of consultations with individual community organisations and leaders, service providers and subject matter experts. Through all of the issues identified, those pertaining to multicultural young people were raised as priority areas of concern.



Victoria's Diversity

Migration to Victoria has resulted in increasing diversity over time; creating one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world with a population of more than 6.5 million as at 31 March 2019.

Victoria's multicultural and linguistic diversity is a mainstream issue as highlighted by the following:

- Victoria's population has grown from 4.9m in 2006 to 5.9m in 2016; a 20% increase in ten years; with the overseas born proportion having increased from 23.8% to 28.4%;
 - the proportion of overseas born and Australia-born with at least one parent having been born overseas increasing from 43.5% to 49%.
 - With respect to LOTE (Language Other Than English) speakers at home, the proportion has increased from 20.4% in 2006 to 26.0% in 2016.
- Greater Melbourne's population has grown from 3.6m in 2006 to 4.5m in 2016; a 24.8% increase in ten years.
 - with the overseas born proportion having increased from 28.9% to 33.9%; and, the proportion of overseas born and Australia-born with at least one parent having been born overseas increasing from 51.2% to 57.1%.
 - With respect to LOTE speakers at home, the proportion has increased from 26.3% in 2006 to 32.6% in 2016.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on **immigration** due to travel restrictions to Victoria and Australia, it is likely that the previous trends will return once the pandemic has been brought under control.

As immigration will continue to drive population growth, it is essential that Victoria's increasing cultural and linguistic diversity be at the forefront of policymaking, policy implementation (including funding), service design and delivery, and performance monitoring and evaluation across Victoria's youth policy.



Factors underpinning our recommendations

- Victoria is regarded as one of the most diverse, socially cohesive and successful multicultural societies in the world. It is also acknowledged as one of the leaders in multicultural affairs and for how it supports a culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse society. Our diversity is increasing.
- Regarding attitudes to multiculturalism, The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion Survey 2019 found that 85% of respondents agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, which confirms its previous findings since the survey commenced in 2007. Further the 2019 Survey found that 64% of respondents believe that migrants make Australia stronger.
- Victoria's multicultural community infrastructure comprises of more than 4,000 ethno-specific, faith-specific and multicultural community organisations, which provide a myriad of benefits particularly in the context of facilitating successful settlement but are often inadequately utilised or under-resourced.
- To maintain the benefits, and ideally enhance them, we must fully acknowledge and embrace our diversity, requiring intellectual and financial investment. As a nation, we haven't yet fully embraced the opportunities that our multicultural diversity provides nor fully acknowledged or addressed its challenges.
- To ensure genuine access and equity, a positive reframe of the design and delivery of our policies and services is required; one that moves beyond acknowledgment to embracement of our diversity as a reality and strength; and one that ensures protections against exclusion, discrimination, vilification, racism and hate.
- **Reframing the multicultural community infrastructure as a complementary component to service delivery** in a society that is increasingly diverse is critically important, not only in facilitating inclusion, access and equity but in the longer term will deliver reduced costs and improve productive participation, a sense of inclusion and belonging and enhance social cohesion. The current mainstream versus ethno-specific/multicultural discourse is misplaced. They are complementary.
- **Genuine consultation and co-design in programs and services** needs to be built into our systems thinking, design and implementation. The voice of the communities needs to be part of the solution. This includes the need to work with community leaders as trusted members of community to provide support and mentoring opportunities for multicultural youth.




High-level systemic recommendations

There is significant room for improvement requiring meaningful, systemic and sustainable change in the youth service and engagement system. Some of these reforms and changes include:

1. **Better data collation and research** on cultural diversity – including utilisation rates and outcomes – to accurately understand the needs and appropriately target resources as well as **strengthen reporting tools by** reviewing, update and implement relevant guidelines.
2. **Workforce diversity** must be improved. It stands to reason that service providers that are reflective of the community they serve is one that understands it better and therefore is able to design policies, programs and services that are more responsive of the needs. This includes:
 - 2.1 **The employment of bicultural workers**
 - 2.2 **Develop a multicultural workforce strategy**
 - 2.3 **Targets on priority cohorts**
 - 2.4 **Develop a multicultural education plan** – to adequately equip future youth workers with the skill and understanding on how to best support multicultural young people.

This process will need to closely engage with professional colleges and associations, universities and other education and training providers covering psychology, psychiatry, social work, community development and other related professions.

3. **Strengthen departmental funding agreements** to ensure that funded agencies monitor and report on the diversity of their clients and compare with the demographics of the area they service.
4. **Improve cultural competency** of generalist service delivery agencies. Apart from accredited cultural competency training, this could be strengthened through:
 - 4.1 **Ensuring that boards and committees of youth services** are more reflective of the community they serve. This could be encouraged through procurement requirements and funding agreements; and
 - 4.2 **Requiring agencies and service providers to establish community advisory committees** to provide advice and guidance on improving access and responsiveness.
 - 4.3 Where applicable, **ensure the indicators and measures are linked** to the Victorian Government's whole of government requirements under the Multicultural Affairs Legislation.
5. **A dedicated anti-racism / social inclusion program.** Racism has been well documented as having real physical and mental health impacts. Racist and discriminatory behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with external and international factors and influences, has added additional challenges. This strategy needs to be comprehensive and multi-layered.
6. **Tailored and targeted communication and community engagement.** There is a need for greater focus on targeted or tailored approach to communication and engagement with communities.

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7. **Funding and incorporating multicultural/multifaith sector service delivery as part of the “mainstream”.** These organisations and services providers are critical and need to be part of the “mainstream”, not competition.
 8. **Genuine whole of government and agency approach to address multicultural youth over representation in youth justice,** including tailored preventative support and wrap around post release assistance.
 9. **Better utilisation and/or enhancement of multicultural youth advisory bodies and/or committees** at both local government and state government level to facilitate co-design and ensure youth engagement.
 10. **Enhancing capacity, networks and social capital of young people from multicultural backgrounds,** including leadership capacity and intercultural capability.



¹Orygen – Designing mental health services for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds: Good practice framework, 2019