

14 December 2020



The Hon. Ros Spence MP
Minister for Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Community Sport, Minister for Youth

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Josh Bull MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs, Parliamentary Secretary for Youth

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Dear Minister Spence and Honourable Josh Bull

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On behalf of AMES Australia and its board, I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the next Victorian Youth Strategy. Our response speaks specifically to issues and experiences of young people from refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Our submission is based on AMES Australia's long history of providing comprehensive settlement support, English language, literacy and digital skills, vocational training and employment services to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers - including young people, in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Sydney. AMES Australia successfully delivers these services through our unique position as a multi-service provider and strong partnerships with communities, government and service providers.

For all AMES clients, education and employment are the cornerstones of inclusive economic and social participation. Access to services, work, vocational training, local sport and qualifications recognition all rely on foundational education in language, literacy, numeracy, employability and community orientation. Our clients from refugee and CALD backgrounds face difficulties and compounding disadvantages such as low levels of English, disrupted education and employment history, social isolation, community disengagement, and mental health issues. Many young people in our services have experienced past trauma from war and forced migration experiences resulting in ongoing depression, anxiety, withdrawal and learning difficulties.

AMES submission provides responses to the key discussion questions posed in the Discussion paper and presents the following key messages for consideration by the Victorian Government:

- Youth initiatives need to have a holistic approach, considering all aspects of a young person's life and circumstances
- Outdoor activities promote both physical and mental wellbeing and address health inequities
- Reduce barriers to flexible education options and fund scaffolded support including counselling, mentoring, practical placement opportunities and volunteering
- Support digital, language, literacy, numeracy and career education programs as the foundation for young people to identify and realise their goals
- Educate young people about their rights to build confidence and empower them to feel in control and more secure in society
- Address the vulnerability of international students
- Continue to support and build on targeted youth employment initiatives such as the JobMaker Hiring Credit
- Consider building specific incentives for hiring CALD youth into government contracts and KPIs such as the Victorian Social Procurement Framework

We commend the Victorian government for the initiative to develop a whole of government youth strategy to delivering successful services for our youth. AMES has strong relationships with CALD communities, international students, employers and service providers and we welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Victorian government to progress the engagement with CALD communities.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Scarth'.

Catherine Scarth
Chief Executive Officer



AMES Australia's responses to key discussion questions posed in the Discussion Paper

1. *We are committed 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. Does this statement capture your vision and aspirations for young Victorians? Why or why not?*

This statement aligns well with AMES Australia's vision of full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society. AMES Settlement Framework for Social and Economic Participation informs our activities to address migrants' successful settlement journeys in four key domains: Employment, Education, Health and Wellbeing, and Safety and Security. AMES builds the capacity of young people by recognising their strengths and skills and taking a holistic, integrated approach to supporting and enabling their settlement through activities across our four impact domains.

In order to capture the critical early period of development in a person's life, 'youth' may be best understood as a linear period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood, however, the category of youth is more fluid than other age-groups. Even though age might be the easiest way to define this group it is important to consider impacting circumstances that can stretch the traditional definition of youth – such as gender, disability, cultural, ethnic, economic and generational disadvantage. Young people from refugee and CALD backgrounds often manage a range of challenges linked to their settlement journey simultaneously, while at the same time transitioning through the same transition points as their Australian-born peers.

2. *Do you think the discussion paper captures the key challenges facing young Victorians and the priorities and issues of most importance to them? Is there anything missing or that needs to be changed?*

AMES commends the Government's acknowledgement of the unique needs young people from refugee and CALD backgrounds have and that this cohort faces unique challenges and barriers. However, it is important to acknowledge that these unique barriers do not impact young people in isolation.

Many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds arrive with a complex suite of issues including complex physical and mental health issues, disability and disrupted educational experiences. Furthermore, research¹ indicates that COVID-19 has exacerbated racism and racial discrimination amongst young people, particularly those from multicultural backgrounds, those who are first generation Australians, and who are female.

As a sense of belonging determines young people's capacity to participate in cultural and social spheres and while it may be expected that most newly arrived young people have friends from the same ethnic/religious/national background as themselves, many may find it challenging to make friends of different backgrounds. These intersecting challenges can act as compounding barriers to engagement and successful settlement and it is vital that they are taken into consideration holistically when supporting young people.

Moreover, AMES believes it is crucial to acknowledge and celebrate the value of mentoring and volunteering programs as they build young people's social capital and assist in connecting young people to broader community networks.

¹ Doery, K., Guerra, G., Kenny, E., Harriott, L. & Priest, N. (2020). *Hidden Cost: Young multicultural Victorians and COVID-19*. Melbourne, Victoria: Centre for Multicultural Youth.

3. *What needs to change for all young people to be empowered in every aspects of Victorian life – civic, political, social and economic? Consider the many identities and experiences that shape how young people live in the world.*

The following themes and examples support our key messages.

Youth initiatives need to have a holistic approach, considering all aspects of a young person's life and circumstances

Through our experience of delivering youth specific programs, AMES has refined a methodology that has proven effective in engaging young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and could apply to other services targeting young people, such as settlement services and education providers. The underpinning approach is a strength-based, trauma-informed model of practice grounded on the development of an active relationship between a pathway counsellor, a mentor and the learner in order to address personal barriers and create an individualised, flexible and responsive pathway plan. This results in small achievable steps enabling the young person to build on their successes. The model draws on the following principles in the context of CALD young people, however could be applied more widely:

- guided by student goals/aspirations
- youth centric approaches
- strengths-based and empowering practices
- holistic, flexible and adaptive
- engaging and relevant content
- trauma-informed, culturally-sensitive approaches
- collaboration to foster ownership; and
- reducing stigmatisation for disengaged young people to re-enter education or employment, through whole community involvement and connection.

Outdoor activities promote both physical and mental wellbeing and addressing health inequities

Research suggests that outdoor education programs can facilitate and promote psychological wellbeing to prevent the rising incidence of youth mental health issues in Australia.² Skills like problem-solving, decision-making, and relationship-building, when practised in the outdoors, provide instant feedback for reflection and eventually, transference back into everyday life. Additionally, the social capital developed whilst navigating challenging outdoor environments can become a personal attribute that the young person carries with them for life.³ Outdoor programs for therapeutic purposes are not only more effective, but are cheaper than more traditional therapeutic interventions.⁴ Many schools in Australia and abroad have already invested in such programs, but CALD youth often face financial/knowledge barriers to participation. Incorporating extracurricular outdoor activities in youth programs do not only support physical and mental wellbeing, but holds great promise for using strengths-based approaches for attending to health inequities and social disadvantage experienced by CALD youth.

² Schuler, M., Read, G. J. M., Dallat, C. & Salmon, P. M. (In press). Using Cognitive Work Analysis to Evaluate Psychological Wellbeing in School-based Camps. CIEHF Ergonomics and Human Factors Conference 2020. Stratford-upon-Avon, UK, 27-29 April 2020.

³ Gray, T. (2017). A 30-year retrospective study of the impact of outdoor education upon adolescent participants: Salient lessons from the field. *Pathways the Ontario Outdoor Education Journal, Spring, 29(3)*, 4–15

⁴ Gass, M., Wilson, T., Talbot, B., Tucker, A., Ugianskis, M., & Brennan, N. (2019). The Value of Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare for Adolescent Substance Users with Comorbid Conditions. *Substance abuse: research and treatment, 13*, 1178221819870768.

Educating young people about their rights will build confidence and empower them to feel in control and more secure in society

Young people are generally willing and eager to find employment. However, many young people, particularly from CALD backgrounds, do not understand their work rights or feel confident speaking up when they find themselves in cash-in-hand jobs and at risk of being taken advantage of. Our experience tells us that young people are prone to lose a job because they are unaware of appropriate workplace/industry terminology, inexperienced in conflict management or unable to manage relationships with superiors and/or co-workers. Young people may be unfamiliar with how to ask questions and may risk misunderstanding safety policies, resulting in workplace injuries. Educating young people about their rights will build confidence and also awareness of how to escalate issues through the right channels should rights be violated. When a young person is aware of and understands these procedures and systems they report they then feel in control and more secure in society.

Address the vulnerability of international students

International students are an important cohort in the Victorian community. While not all are young people many are and add a vibrancy to our cities and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly impacted temporary visa holders, including international students, leaving them feeling isolated, insecure and unsafe. During this time AMES has provided support to international students including online 'Talking Circles' to improve their English and connect with others, webinars regarding work rights, visa information updates and services available.

International students are a particularly vulnerable cohort as the following scenarios demonstrate:
Scenario 1:

- arrived in Victoria in February 2020 and went into the first round of lockdown restrictions
- reported isolation without support networks in a new country
- most have never lived outside of the family home
- may report they still feel lonely, scared and have limited understanding of where and how to seek support.

despite living in student accommodation they have spent prolonged periods of isolation with strangers and only been able to speak with their family overseas which has raised more worry and anxiety. Many of these young people have been hesitant to access mental health or financial support through their universities because they believe it may impact their future visa pathways. Those who live in informal living arrangements, with relatives for example, have not been able to access rent relief. Most international students AMES has been in contact with have had limited access to basic supplies such as food and have restricted their meals. The majority (around 90%) of requests to AMES Relief Fund for People in Need have come from the international student cohort.

Scenario 2:

- international students who have been in Victoria for longer periods have suffered financial hardship as many have funds to support their studies but rely on casual employment for living expenses. They have not been able to access their casual jobs, many of which were cash-in hand, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and have been unable to show proof of lost income in order to access the Victorian Government's relief fund for international clients.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to implement support services for visa holders such as international students, not only in the event of any future emergencies but also to support them in creating welcoming and safe, supportive environments.

4. *Government, community organisations, businesses, education and service providers all have an important role to play in working with and for young people. How can we work together to better meet the needs of young people?*

AMES supports the current mechanisms for young people to influence policy and services, such as youth advisory groups (e.g. Victorian Youth Congress), youth representatives (e.g. VMC Youth Commissioner) and sector partnerships (e.g. CMY and YACVic). While young people AMES supports are interested in engaging with debates and policy issues such as climate change, they do not necessarily know how to become involved. It is proposed that improved outreach into communities is needed to engage with CALD youth, noting that previous trauma in their home countries may contribute to a distrust or suspicion towards representatives of the government and it can take time to build the trusting relationships with young people and they need to see that the engagement is genuine. Feedback from young people is that they are seeking an authentic, ongoing line of communication with decision-makers.

There is the opportunity for increased collaboration and engagement between community leaders, local government and trusted service providers. Agencies such as Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) – a long-standing Victorian based initiative with the mission to create and develop sustainable relationships, partnerships and brokerage of initiatives with and across local schools, education providers, industry and community – is a model that could be extended and contextualised for a broader young person scope. Building on the LLENs could create: improved education, training and employment outcomes of young people; develop partnerships and collaborations with and across stakeholders to support young people; undertake local strategic planning; provide local advice on state-wide policy and program issues; and serve as an active platform for joining government initiatives.

5. *If you could change one program, initiative or policy in Victoria, what would you change?*

Due to the diversity of young people's needs and aspirations creating greater flexibility in accessing Skills First funding is supported. For example, removing limitations to funded training regarding the number of funded courses over a lifetime; and being able to access lower level AQF courses when an alternative pathway is identified. Secondly, the rate of funding or supplementary funding for youth specific programs would scaffold service and support provision e.g. funded career counselling; personal development (e.g. UCan2); incentives for sporting, community, volunteering and employers to engage with and offer real life/work experience for young people. Third, supporting initiatives such as pre-accredited 'Trade Tasters' introduce young people to difference industries and occupations, assisting them in making informed and realistic decisions about their employment aims and aspirations.

6. *What is working well that the Victorian Government could build on to improve outcomes for young people?*

Continue to support targeted youth employment initiatives such as the JobMaker Hiring Credit

AMES supports the continuous delivery of youth related employment initiatives such as PaTH Employability Skills Training, PaTH Internships and most recently, the federal initiative JobMaker Hiring Credit.

Holistic youth initiatives such as the Skills First Reconnect program have been proven to achieve results for young people. For example: through the most recent round of this program, AMES was able to support a total of 247 young people, with 233 achieving an employment or education outcome.

Consider building specific incentives for hiring CALD youth into government contracts and KPIs such as the Victorian Social Procurement Framework

Lack of qualifications and work experience hinders young people 'getting the foot in the door'. Consider building specific incentives for hiring youth into government contracts and KPIs to support individuals with social disadvantages, including youth from migrant and refugee backgrounds. An exemplar for good policy is the Victorian Social Procurement Framework which has been very effective in creating incentives for businesses involved in major government projects and supply contracts to create training programs/practical experience programs for a range of potential employees with multiple barriers. Similar types of incentives could convince a wider range of businesses to provide practical placement opportunities for young people to gain workplace experience.

7. What role can you or your organisation play to improve the lives of young Victorians?

AMES will continue to deliver youth focused programs for CALD young people; support their learning goals and employment aspirations; and support international students through:

- youth specific pre-accredited and accredited education programs
- industry tours
- social participation programs such as 'Shop & Cook' to foster social connections and build life skills; and
- volunteer programs.

AMES stands ready to further collaborate with the Victorian government. The organisation is well placed to amplify the Youth voice through its deep engagement with a diverse range of CALD communities, families and youth representatives, to seek their advice and input into policy, programs and services that would further harness the talent, strength and reliance of CALD young people.