

The Many Voices of Young Australians

Who should read this?

Between 2007 and 2010, the Scanlon Foundation funded three projects involving young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. These projects have had a significant positive impact in communities and have helped the Scanlon Foundation to achieve its mission ‘to support the creation of a larger cohesive Australian society’.

During the past three years, much was learnt by the service providers who delivered the projects and by the Scanlon Foundation. The projects have produced useful resources based on these learnings, which we are now sharing in the belief that the information might help:

- community groups seeking Scanlon Foundation support for projects related to social cohesion/cultural diversity
- service delivery organisations wanting to improve how they respond to the particular needs of young people from culturally diverse backgrounds
- funding agencies and organisations wishing to build on the positive outcomes of the three projects
- all groups and individuals interested in achieving improved social cohesion in an increasingly diverse Australian society.

The projects

The three Scanlon Foundation projects were auspiced by the Australian Multicultural Foundation.

Voices of Young Australians: Uniting for Social Cohesion, delivered by the Centre for Multicultural Youth, Victoria

This three-year project was based in the Cities of Hume and Whittlesea and in the Shire of Melton. These are local government areas on the northern fringes of Melbourne experiencing growth and demographic changes.

The project had three main objectives:

- to help young people from diverse cultural and faith backgrounds to develop youth leadership skills through leadership training
- to increase community acceptance of cultural diversity through dialogue and youth-led activities
- to mentor future leaders in diverse communities.

Nine local schools were key partners in the project, which delivered leadership training to 96 young people aged 13–18 years.

During the program, the young people planned and delivered 13 varied projects. All of their projects aimed to combat racism and to improve social cohesion within their schools and broader communities.

The young people were supported by mentors. In response to annual reviews, the mentoring model was changed to better suit the needs of the young people and the nature of their projects.

Connections: Culturally Diverse Youth Development Project, delivered by St George Youth Services Inc. NSW

This project was based in the St George and Sutherland regions in the inner west of Sydney. These regions have very diverse populations with a mix of established communities and new arrivals.

The project had three main objectives:

- to help young people from culturally diverse backgrounds develop leadership skills through leadership training
- to build awareness and acceptance of cultural identity through youth-led activities and the media
- to enhance the social development of culturally diverse young people by improving knowledge, life skills and networking.

Forty-six high schools were involved in the project, and 68 young people were trained in leadership skills.

Three anti-racism forums were organised and delivered. A number of workshops and events promoting racial harmony and cultural diversity complemented the forums.

Several community groups supported the project, providing mentoring and advice to the young people.

St George Youth Services Inc. has successfully applied for funding from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) to take the project to its next stage.

Under the Radar: Multicultural Youth Living on the Margins, delivered by Multicultural Youth South Australia

This project, which was based in Adelaide, targeted young people at risk living in various parts of the city. All participants were young men from African backgrounds.

The project had three main objectives:

- to deliver a series of targeted programs for at-risk young men from culturally diverse backgrounds
- to undertake parallel research to identify the key issues affecting the lives and futures of at-risk young men from culturally diverse backgrounds

- to develop a train-the-trainer toolkit to help other service providers to better meet the needs of the targeted group.

The targeted program helped 112 young men at risk. The program included boot camps, adventure activities, access to expert support services, information and training workshops, and a mentor program.

The project prepared and disseminated a research report that included 32 recommendations to key stakeholders. The aim was to improve mainstream service provision and to provide evidence of the need for further targeted resources beyond the life of the Scanlon Foundation funded project.

Based on the research, a train-the-trainer toolkit with six training modules was developed and piloted with six mainstream agencies. The toolkit is supported by DIAC and is now offered as a fee-for-service activity by Multicultural Youth South Australia.

Governments at all levels have committed significant ongoing funding to implement many of the research report's recommendations.

What do the projects have in common?

In broad terms, all three projects addressed the issues facing young people from culturally diverse backgrounds during adolescence and young adulthood. All projects were delivered by specialist youth agencies.

The driver for the three projects was the same: young people from culturally diverse backgrounds often face challenges and difficulties that can impede them from reaching their full potential and from participating fully in a socially cohesive Australia. All three agencies believe that culturally sensitive, active interventions are required to redress this situation.

The three projects each received the same amount of Scanlon Foundation funding over the three-year period.

How do the projects differ?

Voices of Young Australians and *Connections: Culturally Diverse Youth Development Project* both embraced a model in which young male and female secondary school students from culturally diverse backgrounds actively engaged in effecting social change by addressing issues surrounding racism. Both projects had a very similar model:

- identification and training of young leaders
- mentor support
- young people taking leadership roles in planning and organising activities and programs designed to combat racism.

In contrast, *Under the Radar* addressed the needs of much marginalised young males from African refugee backgrounds. These young men were disengaged from school and unemployed; many were engaging in anti-social/illegal activity. These young males were seen to benefit from a more traditional case-management approach to helping them re-engage with mainstream activities and support services. As such, they did not have an active ‘change agent’ role in this project. The project also differs in that, from the project inception, it incorporated a well-planned research component.

What learnings are common to the three projects?

As they progressed through the three-year time frame, the three agencies independently and regularly reflected on their projects, and they reported these learnings in annual progress reports. Through these reports, the Scanlon Foundation was also able to reflect on the progress of the projects.

During the projects, all three agencies modified key aspects of their delivery models in response to what they were learning about the cultures and lives of the young people.

Some of the common learnings described below are broad in theme in that they are related to good project design and management; some are specific in that all three projects focused on issues related to young people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Broad and inclusive definition of cultural diversity and multiculturalism

The three projects realised the importance and value of underpinning their work with a broad and inclusive definition of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. All projects aimed to achieve social change by combating racism and its consequences and/or by increasing opportunities for young people to fully participate in Australian society. It was realised that intervention and participation of young and older Australians of *all* backgrounds was crucial to success. Therefore, Australian-born young people were recruited into the leadership program. Mainstream agencies, such as schools, police and local government, were considered crucial elements in the process of change.

A strategic clear purpose

Each of the three projects benefited from a strategic (i.e. long-term) clear purpose. The three-year funding period helped this long-term planning. All three projects focused on interventions that would not only help selected young people in the short term but also cause ‘ripple effects’—more projects and long-term changes to the ways in which mainstream agencies work to better serve the needs of all Australians.

Realistic and ‘doable’

All of the projects were realistic and ‘doable’. They were underpinned by clear annual business plans, which outlined milestones and stages. The projects could be modified annually to take account of experience and new knowledge. This realistic but flexible approach is particularly important with projects that have many variables and multiple

stakeholders with differing perspectives, and where the impact of cultural issues cannot always be predicted.

Business plans

Realistic and detailed business plans were developed before any project work commenced. This was helped and supported by the auspicing body, the Australian Multicultural Foundation. All three agencies found this a useful experience, helping them to deliver their projects within budget and within the three-year time frame.

Partnerships and broad stakeholder engagement

The three agencies realised the value and importance of partnerships and broad stakeholder engagement. All three projects paid more than lip service to this activity. In projects of this type the real engagement is not always easy. It is not as simple and straightforward as establishing an expert advisory group as is the practice in many projects. Few people are expert in identifying and meeting the needs of young people from refugee backgrounds.

Schools, for example, needed to be convinced of the long-term value of the projects and the benefits to their school community. Police needed to be convinced of the long-term value of spending sporting and social time with young offenders and those at risk of offending. Local governments needed to be convinced that the projects would enhance and complement—not duplicate—their work with young people. Mentors needed to be convinced that they required new skills in cultural understanding and sensitivity if they were to work successfully with young people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In all of these relationships, the projects were not only trying to gain support from the mainstream but also trying to act as agents of change in those same mainstream organisations. Such relationships are often more complex to establish and maintain than relationships related to other projects. All three agencies agreed that ‘partners are the key to success and sustainability of the projects’.

Not underestimating the time and complexity involved in project management and coordination

The agencies agreed that they learnt not to underestimate the time and complexity involved in project management and coordination. Two factors influenced time spent. First, projects involving many professionals from a wide range of stakeholder groups need time for convincing, managing and retaining the professionals, and time for individuals to acquire and practise new skills. Second, the three agencies learnt that more time and cultural sensitivity was required to engage the young people than they had initially calculated. In the leadership programs, more time than initially planned was required to work with schools to identify and engage potential leaders. In the program for marginalised young men it took a great deal more time than initially thought to win the young person’s trust and then to fully understand their cultural, family and broader life issues. Both were essential pre-requisites to providing the young men with effective one-to-one support.

Spreading and sharing the project coordination and management

It was realised that there is significant risk in all the knowledge and expertise residing in one project coordinator. Projects can falter if that person leaves or is no longer involved in the project. It is important from the outset to minimise this risk by spreading and sharing the project coordination and management. It is also highly desirable to have senior agency staff involved in the progress of the projects. Not only can they provide support and guidance but they can also be powerful advocates for project outcomes and can influence mainstream stakeholders.

Project workers engage in reflective practice from the outset

While all three projects had clear objectives and sound management, there was a general understanding that the projects were ‘breaking new ground’, trialling new models and gaining new knowledge as the projects progressed. It was therefore essential that project workers engaged in reflective practice from the outset. Project staff were constantly questioning their approaches: What new cultural understandings are we gaining as we work with these young people? What new understandings do we have of the barriers they face? What new understandings about the strengths and limitations of mainstream agencies are we gaining as we engage them? What is working and what is not working? Do we need to change to improve outcomes for the young people as well as to meet external expectations? The project coordinators and workers had the insight and courage to change emphasis and/or direction based on what they had learnt from the project to date. Such changes are not failures but ‘wise adjustments’ to the project design and implementation and can be negotiated with the funding body.

A clear program model

All three agencies were involved in projects with various strands of activity. It was important that the project staff were able to isolate and plot these strands according to a time frame and to have a clear program model that focused on reaching milestones, adapting activities if needed, and, above all, the long-term results and sustainability. A clear program model informed by experience and prior research into the specific needs of culturally diverse young people was therefore essential.

Use of mentors

The projects all featured the use of mentors in working with young people. This model proved to be a powerful tool with mutual benefits: access to skills, knowledge and networks for the young people, and—often transformative—learning experiences for the mentors. While mentoring is a common tool used in many situations, the mentoring in these projects required particular sensitivity and flexibility to meet the specific and often complex needs of the young people.

In the two youth leadership projects, mentors helped the young leaders design and execute their anti-racism projects and events. In both projects, the initial mentoring model was later adapted as program workers learnt about the young people and the mentors. The emphasis changed from traditional one-to-one mentoring to group-work activity-based approaches.

This model fitted more comfortably with the cultural backgrounds of the mentors and mentees.

Using mentors in the program for marginalised youth was also challenging but very useful. Mentors were important to reducing the isolation of marginalised youth, to giving them access to broader mainstream networks and services and also to providing them with much needed positive role models. In this case, it was clear for cultural reasons that group mentoring would be a successful adjunct to one-to-one relationships. It was also clear that due to the many and complex needs of the young men, careful selection and in-depth training of mentors was essential, even when the mentors were from the young men's own communities and language groups.

What are the learnings specific to the Voices of Young Australians and Connections: Culturally Diverse Youth Development Project?

Youth leadership model works successfully

The youth leadership model works successfully with young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Both agencies used models underpinned by theoretical work in this field (the 'ladder model' and social learning theory).

Adapt the model

In both cases the models were adapted in light of the cultural composition of the groups.

Young leaders are positive agents of change

Recruiting young people who had the time to undertake training and project activities was important. The training content and delivery was adapted and tailored to meet specific needs. The young leaders themselves benefited from the experience, gaining new skills, confidence and networks. The leadership groups, which were very culturally diverse, discovered they had much in common; in fact, they modelled 'social cohesion' within their leadership groups. The leaders were positive agents of change within their school communities. Their peers listened to their messages in ways that would not have happened in adult-run activities.

Technology can be a powerful tool

The leadership program 'unleashed creativity' and introduced new ideas to the projects. In particular, the young people were able to demonstrate that technology can be used as a powerful tool to share information and to develop cohesive and expanding groups of young people committed to eliminating racism from their communities.

What are the learnings specific to the *Under the Radar* project?

Intensive one-to-one support is necessary to assist young people who have complex personal issues related to self esteem, anger management, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness and criminal offences. An intensive case-management approach is a common intervention used to assist many young people who are marginalised or at risk. This project

shows that this approach must be adapted and tailored to meet the specific needs of young men from African refugee backgrounds. More time than is usual—‘twice as much time’—is needed to build the young person’s trust, upon which all successful case work is based. In addition, project staff developed seven specific case-management principles designed to take into account the cultural backgrounds and life experiences of these young men. These principles are intended to provide guidance to all support agencies so that they might provide sensitive and successful one-to-one support.

Research methodology should be specific to the client group

Carefully planned and executed research can provide valuable new knowledge and evidence of need. It is, however, important that the research methodology takes into account the specific personal and cultural characteristics of the individuals and groups. In this case, it was initially intended to use traditional research methods to collect useful data, but it was soon realised that a more informal, verbal approach with the young men yielded far more useful information.

Research can inform improvements

Research can be a very useful tool to inform improvements to service delivery for both specialist and mainstream service providers if the new knowledge is widely disseminated in ways that are useful to professionals (e.g. toolkits and resources).

Research evidence can be an advocacy tool

The evidence gained from research can also be a powerful and persuasive advocacy tool if it is widely disseminated in places of influence. The *Under the Radar* project demonstrated this by informing state and federal ministers, policy makers, service planners and decision-makers of the results of their research. Because they were able to show evidence of need, they have gained substantial funding to ensure the long-term sustainability of the initial Scanlon Foundation funded project.

What are the learnings related to young people?

It is difficult to generalise about the young people. Some were well advanced in their secondary education, had lived in Australia for most of their lives and were successfully negotiating the journey between their family cultural background and mainstream Australia. Others were recently arrived young people from refugee backgrounds who had lost immediate family in traumatic circumstances and who did not have the social and language skills required to successfully participate in education, employment and the life of mainstream Australia. However, project workers did note that all of the young people faced, to varying degrees, a significant number of barriers to effective participation in Australian life. These barriers, which are familiar to those working in the field, are described below.

Language and literacy issues

This was particularly evident for newly arrived young people, but also for those who had attended special targeted English language programs. Some young people had listening and

speaking skills but did not have sufficient reading and writing skills to realise their full potential in the upper levels of secondary schooling.

Difficulty adjusting to Australian schools

This was particularly noticeable in the groups of recently arrived refugee young men. This is not surprising given that many had experienced interrupted schooling in refugee camps and had not had the opportunity to develop coping and study skills in their country of origin. It is clear that some schools enrolling significant numbers of refugee students for the first time need additional support and training to successfully respond to the educational and social needs of their new students.

Lack of youth employment opportunities

In a small number of cases this was due to the lack of recognition of the young person's skills or qualifications obtained overseas. In other instances the young person had disengaged from education and training since arriving in Australia and therefore did not have the work experience or communication and technical skills that employers wanted. Lack of access to public or private transport was also an issue, particularly where the young person lived a significant distance from available employment.

Lack of role models, mentors and contacts

These are often taken for granted by many young Australians and can often ease transitions between education, training and sustainable employment.

Lack of coordinated support to address underlying social and psychological needs

This kind of support is important for young people, especially for those who have experienced significant trauma in their home country.

Intergenerational conflict within some families

This can occur as the young person seeks to fulfil the cultural and social mores and priorities of their family and adopt those of the broader Australian culture.

The do's and don'ts of project design and management

Do	Don't
Define and articulate a long-term strategic purpose for the project.	Focus solely on short-term benefits that individuals or groups may gain from the available funding.
Keep the immediate project goals focused and 'narrow' rather than broad and overly ambitious.	Try to achieve too much. The Scanlon Foundation acknowledges that project issues are often complex and challenging.
Spend time developing a three-year business plan that has clearly defined key performance indicators and that aligns resources available with activities to be undertaken.	Rush into the project with enthusiasm and passion but without a detailed plan shared and understood within your organisation.
From the outset, actively engage mainstream organisations in your work so that you achieve long-term change and sustainability.	Work in isolation, even if you believe that some mainstream organisations and agencies do not understand the needs of the client group in the way that you do.
Create realistic timelines that take into account the complex needs of the young people and of other stakeholders.	Underestimate the complexity of needs and the cultural factors that make it take longer than usual to engage the young person.
Ensure that project management and coordination is shared among several staff in your organisation, including senior management.	Separate the Scanlon Foundation funded project from the other work of your organisation, restricting the expertise and knowledge to one person or a small group.
Use proven methods of empowerment wherever possible. Engage the young people not only in articulating their issues but also in finding solutions to them.	Focus on traditional service delivery and 'welfare' approaches as an end in themselves. If these approaches are needed, see them as part of a longer journey to young people's inclusion and empowerment.
Recognise that not everything in your plan is going to work exactly as you expect. Be prepared to negotiate changes to elements of your program in light of what you learn as the project progresses. Reflection and change are marks of project success, not of failure.	Adhere rigidly to a project plan that is not working because you fear that funding from the Scanlon Foundation may be at risk.
Wherever possible build a culturally sensitive research component into your project. This will help you to formalise your collection of new data/knowledge, to improve service delivery and to provide evidence of further need and, therefore, of need for further funding.	'Lock away' what you are learning, including project successes and 'failures'.
From the outset, think of how you are going to build on and continue the Scanlon Foundation funded project beyond the life of the funding. What are you going to do to try to ensure the long-term sustainability of the worthwhile work?	See the project only as a three-year Scanlon Foundation funded activity. See the project as a beginning, not as an end in itself.