



WORKING WITH VICTORIA'S AFRICAN COMMUNITY

African Think Tank Inc

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In - Confidence

MINUTES OF MEETING

AFRICAN THINK TANK AND CENTRE FOR AFRICAN AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S ISSUES (CAAWI) COMMUNITY CONSULTATION WITH CHRISTOPHER CALLANAN, DEPUTY STATE DIRECTOR OF DIAC VICTORIA

DATE: 31 January 2007
PLACE: Level 1, 186 Barkly Street, Footscray

ATTENDEES:
DIAC Chris Callanan (Deputy State Director Victoria)
Belinda Duggan (Community Liaison Officer)

AFRICAN COMMUNITY Dr Berhan Ahmed (African Think Tank)
Haileluel Gebre-Selassie (African Think Tank)
Samia Baho (CAAWI)
+20 other African Grass root community representatives

Parliamentary Secretary Robb was initially invited to attend this consultation and accepted. Due to the portfolio reshuffle he later declined and Chris Callanan was chosen to represent the Department. The aim of the consultation was for African community members to discuss issues impacting on African communities with a specific focus on English learning opportunities.

Following are the points raised during the consultation:

- Learning English is an extremely important issue for the African community. If members are unable to communicate it marginalises them from mainstream society, which has a negative impact on effective integration and on the community as a whole.

- The current English language learning system does not work for everyone. Criticisms of AMES include:
 - There is no level of functionality with the AMES teaching system. It is not suitable for the differing language, gender and demographic needs of the African community.
 - AMES has no curriculum, structure, no exam and has used the same resources for the last 2 years
 - An academic style of teaching needs to be adopted. Students are claiming to be learning through newspapers and are not getting any value out of this process.
 - Classes need to start from the beginning, depending upon where you have come from. Eg. Often those coming from Africa have not touched a pen, do not know how to write on a line and are illiterate in their own language.
 - A practical change in teaching is required that is student focussed without an emphasis on hours.
 - Lessons need to be in context and offer a reason for learning. The way of teaching has to fit the audience learning. Language makes sense when the community are using services and learning English, which is going to help them with daily life
 - Teachers need to have an understanding of a refugee's background – their own language and culture.
 - 510 hours is not enough and it is difficult to get an extension on these hours
 - People have been in classes for years because they have work commitments and family priorities that prevent them from attending regularly. They are also obtaining no benefit from the classes therefore have little incentive to attend.
 - There are students who do not have the ability to read English or function in daily life who are provided with AMES certificates. There is no functional assessment.
 - The certificates of attendance are useless if people are not learning the language.
 - Learning English through employment and the job network works better than the experience at AMES
 - Childcare needs to be extended for attendees studying more than 510 hours.

- Skilled people in the African community should be used to help devise an English language curriculum at AMES that would suit their community's needs.
- The education learning system in Africa should be adopted/considered in the AMES curriculum particularly to assist adult refugees who have been brought up in this process.
- The previous tutor system used in places such as the Uniting Church facilitated and fast tracked migrants integrating into society. Why was this program dismantled? It was taught in a living situation and worked.
- Other learning programs and systems from countries such as America and Canada need to be reviewed to see what works for the African community.
- Women are adversely affected by the inability to communicate in English. They have no confidence in doing simple things such as shopping, answering the phones, travelling to English classes, linking into an interpreter and when a child is sick they panic with whom to contact. Their children have a better understanding

of English, they feel isolated and that their self-esteem and control have been taken from them

- Often women are ineligible for English classes because of their visa status (reference was made particularly to spouse visas).
- Children need a Centre to be taught after school to keep up with the other students. A partnership could be formed with schools to be used as a learning centre.
- Africans are keen to contribute and be accepted in Australia. 90% of those arriving are sponsored by refugees who do not have the capacity to assist. Half of the time spent with recently arrived refugees is used taking them to appointments and doing other things. Most of the time they are struggling to keep a roof over their head that these and other priorities outweigh learning English and applying for citizenship.
- There are other ways to help the integration process in Australia than increasing residency and English language requirements that make it harder for people who have already had to overcome such extreme circumstances.
- Government funding and resources are put into programs operated by service providers who claim they are helping the African community but its not.
- The Australian government needs to listen to the community and map out the issues. There needs to be working parties with the government to have an understanding of the problems and root causes. An example was given by a government representative from New Zealand who suggested Australia research models from other countries that have been effective.
- The African community have had negative media publicity over the past few months and journalists are putting their own slant on stories/reports, which is creating further marginalisation. .
- The African community should have an influence in Government funding directions since most of the service providers claim to be providing services to their community.

Summary

Although the government has been substantially funding programs for African refugees, the communities are not gaining benefit from these programs as the teaching style and content are inadequate and/or inappropriate. It is felt that providers are just using the same aged material in the same way irrespective of the limitations of the material and teaching methods, and irrespective of the specific needs of individual students and refugee communities, and irrespective of the changes in the society and the workplace.

That is, it is perceived there has not been the respect for the Africans as a settlement group for Service providers to take their learning needs seriously and to ensure staff are willing, proactive and able to teach these people. For example, putting people into classes at any time in the term, even up to the last week, is unrealistic and unreasonable, and would not happen in any mainstream educational context like a TAFE or university without vocal protests. Yet highly disadvantaged learners are subject to this and may waste their hours and learning opportunity being warehoused in a class waiting for a new class to begin next term.

Overall, this situation is causing significant disadvantage to the Africans, resulting in social marginalisation and exclusion from opportunities for work, higher level study and seamless social integration. It has also coincided with media criticism of their language

capacity when the new arrivals have done all in their power to attend classes, but have learned little or nothing due to circumstances beyond their control.

There is a need for close consultation with the communities by all providers and accountability to ensure funding is being used for valid and valuable educational outcomes and not for servicing a large bureaucracy.

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