

Freedom of Speech Brief

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ISSUE

Legislation, lack of education and the abuses of freedom of speech have contributed to obstacles for multicultural and diverse spiritual groups to feel welcome in society and be active in their communities. Issues have been identified in State Government policies including the recently launched *Victoria's Advantage – Unity, Diversity and Opportunity (2014)*, so there are now opportunities for freedom of speech to be defined, and training programs that circumvent these issues to be developed and delivered to Victoria's education sector and young people.

BACKGROUND

The curtailment of freedom of speech has become one of Australia's most contentious points of discussion. This debate has focused on occurrences of everyday racism, institutionalised exploitation or exclusion, as well as efforts within the Victorian education sector to create structural generational change in how we make our language, and then our ideology more inclusive.

Although the current Australian Government has ultimately decided not to fulfil its commitment to modify section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) made by then Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, those events left a lasting impact on the national and local debate regarding protection from discrimination. Responses and protests showed the willingness of communities to fight for their right to offend, and sparked a spirited defence of racial protection laws from multicultural groups and Australians at large. It appears that the fundamental question of 'how much is too much?' when it comes to free speech will continue to dominate the Australian cultural debate for some time.

The principles of multicultural and multi-faith agency are enshrined in the:

- Multicultural Victoria Act (2011);
- Victoria's Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship Policy - *Victoria's Advantage-Unity, Diversity, Opportunity (2014)*
- Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has committed to incorporating cultural diversity into its strategy for the education sector since 2006 and are currently developing their latest plan. The Victorian Government have a responsibility to keep the Department accountable, and play a key role in the resourcing and prioritisation of ethical use of freedom of speech including cultural competencies to be part of education outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Research by the Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network into the current environment surrounding positive freedom of speech found the following key points of interest:

- The DEECD's 2011-2014 Cultural Diversity Plan is still in development, four years behind scheduled release and implementation. It is the assertion of this brief that public measures of supporting inclusive freedom of speech-such as expediting of policies that prioritise it-is a key factor in community-level messaging including community service announcements that will contribute to social cohesion.
- In our investigations of current offerings in the market, there are very few appropriate programs operating at a youth level to engender multicultural and multifaith literacy and understanding. Organisations chiefly 'preach to the converted' by running interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural education in religious schools as opposed to delivering national competencies. Religious education at this time is not sufficient, nor delivered widely enough to create a generational regard for the importance of freedom of speech. This should encompass a wider offering of cross-religious education and the impact of cultural discrimination.
- Australian initiatives that do exist such as 'Racism: No Way!' need to measure up with overseas examples in terms of outcomes, financial backing and incorporation of opinion leaders. Advocacy by the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship will generate interest and support for proactive work on educational buy-in for these provisions so our offerings are comparable with overseas programs.

CONCLUSIONS

- Educating and encouraging a responsible use of freedom of speech for inclusion of multicultural and multi-faith communities should be incorporated into state-wide curricula of cultural literacy or spiritual education, and also reinforced with program offerings at all levels of study to account for gaps in content.
- A stronger offering of freedom of speech promotion at primary school level should be considered so the importance of the issue is introduced at earlier ages.
- Advocacy by the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship for provisions for education about freedom of speech and its responsible use is important to this issue being on the public agenda.
- Allocation of financial support to schools in order to achieve the above, being that open, peer-based discussion of these issues is an effective way to curb racist or otherwise anti-social ideologies or behaviour throughout childhood development. Such support could be used to consult and develop a new program to address issues and activate positive freedom of speech, otherwise work with developing another program like
- Attribution of funding toward organisations that deliver culturally and spiritually inclusive workshops or resources to school-age young people.

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- Promotion of policy that describes, enforces and legitimates freedom of speech as a means to create social cohesion and not to exclude or incite culturally, linguistically or spiritually diverse individuals or communities.
- Training and professional development should be provided and encouraged in this sphere for educators so the promotion of proactive and positive freedom of speech penetrates a diverse range of Victorian communities.

Media Stereotypes Brief

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In 2014 a group of members from the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship's Multicultural Multifaith Youth Network (MMYN) focused its collective energies on the issue of the misrepresentations and misconceptions of minority groups within the media. Young people have the capacity to critically analyse what they see from the media and this can be achieved by engaging young people through media education programs. We aim to work with young people aged 15-25.

BACKGROUND and KEY FINDINGS

Minority groups within Australia have been frequently poorly represented. Too often there are misrepresentation and misconception of minority groups in by the media. Our research indicates that more can be done to improve the situation. Our findings regarding minority groups are broken up into four groups:

Asylum Seekers: The Australian media portrays Asylum seekers in a dehumanising, alienating and exaggerated manner in Australia. There is often a misconception that asylum seekers are 'illegals' and young people do not get the opportunity to learn about or hear the personal stories and struggles of asylum seekers.

Refugees: Refugees are largely misrepresented by the Australian media, who utilise inaccurate portrayals of refugees to develop stereotypes based on prejudice; repeatedly implementing negative connotations such as; 'dole bulgers,' 'unAustralian,' and 'violent.' Misrepresentation leads to falsified opinions by Australian youth; generated by a lack of education. Negative attitudes towards refugees by the community cause negative effects to be felt immensely by refugee youth. Most recently, Afghan and Sri Lankan refugees have been subject to racism, discrimination, unemployment, disempowerment, disconnection and isolation throughout Australian society.

Indigenous Australians: Indigenous Australians are poorly represented by the Australian media. They are often portrayed as primitive, exotic and savage people 'having little to do with the modern world'. Young people do not often get an opportunity to hear the real stories of the Indigenous community; therefore they lack understanding and knowledge about the Aboriginal community.

Religious Groups: The media is quick to report misrepresented facts on some religious groups, such as the Muslim community in Australia. Such reports play on the audiences' emotions through often sensationalised stories that can sell easily. This has resulted in many young people misunderstanding and stereotyping certain religious communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship should provide more funding to media education programs in schools across Victoria. A lack of education is the reason why Australian youth replicate these stereotypes. Increased knowledge would allow young people to make better decisions about what they see on the media.
- Discuss the possibility of programs which target young people and media education with the Minister of Education. Education which would create a better understanding of these minority groups, breaking stereotypes, and the role of the media who creates them.
- Aim to increase the quantity and improve the quality of existing programs through evaluation.
- To work with young journalists and establishing a network to promote and support good journalism through collaboration with university students.

Youth Unemployment Brief

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CONTENTION

A new model of collaboration between State Government Departments will result in:

- Equitable access to professional work experience opportunities for CALD young people;
- Mitigate negative social impacts that result from the identified "gap";
- Serve the interests of key Government Departments.

BACKGROUND

The Multicultural Multifaith Youth Network (MMYN) have identified youth unemployment as a significant concern for young people in Victoria and has considered the following social impacts, especially for those young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds:

- homelessness;
- depression and other mental health issues; and
- financial difficulty and poverty.

The MMYN posit that increasing the amount of opportunities to gain professional experience is imperative to allow youth to develop skills and establish an identity thus reducing these impacts.

For the purpose of this paper, 'Youth' is defined as those between the ages of 15 – 24 and it is acknowledged that there are various support services available for those needing support during their education or between employments but this is not necessarily sufficient for some young people who need additional support. Developing and promoting such services would aim to mitigate the negative social impacts which serve to grow the community.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence states that in Victoria, youth unemployment is approximately 12.13%, amounting to approximately 310,000 young people who are unemployed in the state. Gaining appropriate work experience is a difficult endeavor and even more so for those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Employment prerequisites for a high proficiency in English, formal education and/or practical training prevent those who may qualify for such roles from being granted the opportunity to obtain them.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics highlight that youth aged between 12 to 14 who migrate to Australia face a greater number of barriers towards employment compared to their Australian born counterparts. This disconnect allowed us to model a possible solution linking three key stakeholders:

- Victorian Government;
- employers; and
- employees, who ought to be involved in improving the situation.

FINDINGS

From a State Government perspective, this issue aligns with the strategic objectives of at least three other areas of government including the:

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD);
- Department of State Development, Business and Innovation (DSDBI);
and
- Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI).

This brief acknowledges the unique role of each department while addressing the issue where we aim to promote a 'Whole of Government' approach to arrive at a solution that propels Victoria to leading Australia out of this trend.

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development:

One of their current goals in the overall departmental Ten Year Plan is to give Victorians the relevant skills through raising the quality and economic value of vocational and higher education. This goal is complemented by their strategy to give more power to service providers, holding them more accountable for results and by also working closely with our communities, service providers and staff.

Department of State Development Business and Innovation:

The need for this department is to complement this plan through up to date research and data of youth trends and perceived needs of international student support and development. As one of its key goals in its international education strategy, the capitalization on the broader cultural and economic benefits of international student education, with CALD youth being the focus, the knowledge generated can easily be shared and translated into the engagement of our youth at home.

Department of Environment and Primary Industries:

This department has a number of responsibilities with one specifically focusing on jobs and investment. A tangible solution is seen with the Youth Employment Scheme however, as this is available in all government departments, a focus can be applied by this department in conjunction with this model to fill the gap existing for tertiary students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Education at a Glance 2013¹, Australia's key industries include Agricultural, Fuels and Mining exports, international tourism and foreign students in tertiary education; remaining within the top 10 countries of the world in each category.

While the country's strength focuses on primary industry exports and higher education, the link between taking our educated population into industry is still missing. The model that the MMYN are proposing address these problems at a grass roots level by positioning a united departmental effort by the Victorian Government between both employers and unemployed individuals. Ultimately this will allow for each of the three stakeholders to benefit through mutual support where:

- individuals gain professional experience in their elected field;
- employers gain a point of awareness into the market through people wanting to gain experience, while further receiving a form of benefit from the government (potentially through rebate, exemption, and/or wage subsidies); and
- Victorian Government could make a dent into this social issue, but would also be able to gain data for an array of small to medium industries, while also making initial steps into changing an ingrained culture of racial profiling through collaboration.

Similar models have been tried and tested internationally delivering positive results namely being the UK and Singapore. Both of which have been able to reduce their youth unemployment well below the global average, focusing on gaining experience in given fields and performance based ranking respectively.

This model is further supported by the 2014 recommendations made by the Australian Y20 delegation³ suggesting that youth unemployment should become a priority in current action plans while investigating into partnerships between universities, businesses, communities and government.

Specifically for the Office for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship we recommend:

- To advocate this model with other departments, consulting directly with the MMYN, other relevant groups and CALD young people about how to enhance and improve existing programs.

¹ <http://apo.org.au/research/australian-youth-unemployment-2014-snapshot>

² http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2013_eag-2013-en

³ <http://y20australia.com/news-and-media/y20-australia-2014-delegates'-declaration>

Social Media Brief

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How Social Media can contribute to both the isolation and unification of various ethnic groups within the greater Victorian multicultural society.

BACKGROUND

Social media continues to grow in the influence it has on individuals opinions as providers such as Facebook and twitter have increasingly larger roles in peoples' lives . It is able to raise vast awareness and funds for various issues that otherwise would not receive public attention. People are able promote fundraisers they're taking part in and create awareness of issues that are important to them through social media sites. Issues such as depression, bullying, multiculturalism and various illnesses have achieved a significantly greater awareness due to social media. Social media campaigns such as "Dumb ways to die", "Israel loves Iran, "#polishedmen" and "ALS Icebucket Challenge" have been used to raise awareness and gain support for different issues targeted towards different demographics. Social media can also have a negative influence, allowing hate to be preached to vast audiences with little chance of retribution for the actions of the often anonymous hate speaker.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our research into how social media separates and isolates various ethnic groups as well as people with differing views, indicates that more can be done to improve the treatment and image of these various groups. Our findings include:

- Social media has been a catalyst for many positive social justice campaigns, creating mass participation in combating social issues that otherwise would not receive attention.
- Due to social media and search engine algorithms designed to tailor an individuals newsfeed to their perceived interests, the internet is becoming increasingly closed, filtering out other perspectives and creating greater ethnic division within society.
- As social media usage grows at a rapid rate, it is becoming the dominant source of hate speech in Victorian society.

CONCLUSIONS

- There should be increased resources dedicated to the enforcement of hate speech laws in social media either through greater funding of government or non-government organisations currently engaged in the enforcement of social media hate speech.
- There should be increased public education on how to deal with online hate speech
- There should be public education campaigns using social media that promote diversity, which should be sponsored by or co-ordinated directly by OMAC.