



MYAN NSW

Response to Discussion Paper: Strengthening the Test for Australian Citizenship

June 2017

About MYAN NSW:

Our vision is that all young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in NSW can access the support and opportunities they need to be active citizens in Australian society.

MYAN NSW is the only state-wide multicultural youth specialist organisation. We engage, connect and build the capacity of the youth, settlement and multicultural sectors to effectively meet the needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. We support the development of young people's skills and networks to engage in advocacy and influence the regional, state and national agenda.

MYAN NSW is a hub of networking, information and capacity building, supporting and strengthening the work of our large and diverse network. Our members, partners, services and young people benefit from a range of initiatives and events, including:

- Sector development forums
- Networking meetings and events
- Training workshops for workers and multicultural young people
- Policy advice to government
- Fact sheets, reports and resources
- Contributing to research on key issues
- Regular updates and information

Response to discussion paper:

MYAN NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the discussion paper, *Strengthening the Test for Australian Citizenship*, and would like to draw attention to concerns we have about the impact proposed reforms will have on young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. MYAN NSW believes the proposed reforms will negatively impact on young people's sense of belonging and feeling welcomed, as well as undermining social cohesion more broadly. We know that citizenship is an important tool that promotes integration, cohesion and connectedness. However, when too many barriers exist to attaining citizenship, there is a risk that we will create a two-tiered system of permanent residency: pitting those who are full and active citizens against those who failed to achieve this status. We are particularly focused on how changes to

assessing English language proficiency will unfairly discriminate against some of the most vulnerable young people we work with.

Recommendation 1: English language proficiency requirements for Australian citizenship remain unchanged

English language ability plays a key role in young people achieving full participation in society, however it should not be the only discriminating factor in deciding whether a young person is eligible to apply for Australian citizenship. While English language skills are important for young people to access employment, education, navigate systems and engage with the broader community, it is only one of many factors which facilitate young people to participate in society and achieve their goals and aspirations. We cannot predict success or failure of integration and whether a young person deserves to be an Australian citizen on this one measure alone.

Many young people who enter Australia via the Humanitarian programme face significant barriers to attaining high levels of English proficiency. Disrupted education, low levels of literacy in their first language, experiences of torture and trauma, and the challenges of settling in a new country all impact a young person's ability to learn English. The proposed changes would unfairly discriminate against many young people from citizenship who have enormous potential to be active participants in and contributors to Australian society.

The proposed changes to English language proficiency also raise other important issues, such as the appropriateness of English language tests that will be used to determine a young person's eligibility to apply for citizenship; and whether there will be enhanced government investment in English language programs to support increased language acquisition requirements. MYAN NSW is concerned that testing systems such as IELTS, which are useful in determining academic English proficiency and preparation for higher education, will be used to assess a young person's level of general English ability.

Recommendation 2: Specific needs and circumstances of young people are considered when assessing their efforts to integrate into the community

There are many factors which influence how well a young person is settling, or integrating, into the community. Age, developmental stage, pre-migration experiences and length of time in Australia will impact what integration looks like for a young person. While we are not wholly opposed to the idea of applicants demonstrating their commitment to Australia, it is imperative that young people are provided with adequate support to do this. MYAN NSW is concerned that an attempt to assess how well a young person is integrating will not take into consideration the specific needs and circumstances of young people's settlement journey.

For further comment, please contact Alexandra Long – alex@myannsw.org.au