

# Comments on Proposed Social Cohesion Statement

Submission by Multicultural Youth Affairs Network NSW

April 2021

## Acknowledgement to Country

MYAN NSW acknowledges the traditional custodians of the Darug and Gadigal lands and waters on which we gather for these consultations. We pay our deep respects to their elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that culture and connection to country and community is a right for all First Nations young people.

*Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.*

*This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.*

*—Excerpt from the Uluru Statement of the Heart*

## About Multicultural Youth Affairs Network NSW

MYAN NSW a state-wide multicultural youth specialist service. We provide support and expertise to ensure young people from multicultural backgrounds are able to build the skills, knowledge and networks they need to be active participants in Australian society. We work with young people as partners and support them to identify their strengths and advocate for solutions.

### Our Vision

Young people from multicultural backgrounds in NSW are connected, influential and valued members of Australian society.

### What We Value

We strongly believe that **how** we work is as important as what we do and that MYAN's ways of working embodies our values.

MYAN NSW's ways of working:

#### **Youth Participation**

We facilitate opportunities for young people to exercise their right to fully participate in the decision-making processes that affect and shape their lives.

#### **Collaboration**

We work with young people as partners, in a way that honours their culture, experiences and heritage. We work with our sector to draw on the collective experience of practitioners and believe we are always stronger together.

#### **Diversity in all its forms**

We recognise that diversity is our strength and integral to our success.

#### **Social justice**

We pursue social justice by maintaining a focus on equity, inclusion and cultural accountability.

#### **Challenging the status quo**

We are always looking for new and better ways of working. We do this through valuing learning, reflective practice and taking risks.

## Proposed Social Cohesion Statement

**Social cohesion is Australia's national asset** – Australia is the world's most successful multicultural society. Our social cohesion, shared values and national unity have made us the strong and prosperous liberal democracy that we are today. And we all share the responsibility to keep it that way.

**Our inclusive national identity is based on our shared values** – What brings and keeps us together is our commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and individual freedoms underpinned by mutual respect and tolerance. We embrace a 'fair go' for all, and look out for each other in times of need. We also prize Australia's reputation as a safe and peaceful country, and are proud that it is one of the reasons people are drawn to the Australian way of life.

**Cohesion begins in our communities** – Social cohesion is about working together to make our towns, suburbs and local communities great places to live. This is demonstrated by the many stories of communities and individuals helping one another during recent bushfires and the COVID pandemic.

**A culturally and religiously diverse nation** – Our inclusive national identity welcomes peoples of all cultures and religions. Within the overarching framework of Australia's democracy and laws, our multicultural and multi-faith society is a strength and supports our vibrant society and economic prosperity.

**Australian citizenship is our common bond** – Citizenship is a core element of our national identity and democracy. Whether acquired at birth or as a new citizen - Australian citizenship represents full and formal membership of the Australian community. We value the rights and responsibilities of Citizenship.

**The English language as a unifying force** – English language proficiency is a key contributor to better education and employment outcomes and social participation levels. It helps to provide an overall sense of belonging, and knowledge of English provides access to a diversity of news and information sources.

## About this submission

MYAN NSW welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Social Cohesion Statement prepared by the Department of Home Affairs and provide a youth perspective on Australian values and principles of social cohesion. This submission draws on discussions during an online consultation held in February 2021. Young people were asked to comment on Australian values as defined by Department of Home Affairs ([www.australian-values.gov.au](http://www.australian-values.gov.au)).

## Who was there?

MYAN NSW consistently aims to work in ways that build the confidence of young people and enable them to be leaders. As such, the consultations were co-facilitated by a MYAN Youth Ambassador. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the consultations were held online through Zoom.

A total of 10 young people met, aged between 16 and 22 years. They were a mixture of high school and university students. The young people identified culturally as Lebanese, Kurdish Persian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Bangladeshi, Romanian and Indian.

The consultations ran from 45 to 60 minutes. A series of 6 questions were asked and the questions were shared on screen for participants to view. Young people would take turns sharing their answers with the facilitator's guidance.

## What young people said?

Young people were asked to think about their own community and how well they understood the Australian values and responsibilities. Questions asked also revolved around whether some values were more important than others and if participants felt a sense of inclusion through these values.

1. Thinking about your own community, how well do you think its members understand Australian values and the responsibilities we all have as Australians?
2. Are there some values that seem more important than others? If so, why do you think that is?
3. With reference to values, what are the advantages when Australians live by these values? What are the disadvantages when they are not followed?
4. Do you identify with these values and feel a sense of inclusion through them?
5. What practical actions could the Australian Government take to promote values?
6. Do you have any further comments about Australian Values?

### **Question 1: How well do you think the members of your community understand Australian values and the responsibilities we all have as Australians?**

The group's discussion mostly gravitated towards the interpersonal values outlined in the values statement, as opposed to those relating to the rule of law and democratic traditions. Young people expressed that they saw Australian values expressed within their day to day lives, both within and outside their immediate communities.

Though it was noted that some participants felt there was an intellectual understanding of Australian values and responsibilities within their community, these values were not always directly expressed for a variety of reasons or in some cases, such as international students, their responsibilities towards Australia were not made clear.

**"I would like equality of opportunities to be improved. In terms of my school, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we tried to make things as equitable as**

possible with financial aid and assistance. A community event such as NAIDOC will be significant, every Australian must have the responsibility to understand our past and that this country was formed long before the First Fleet came. Not only in schools but we acknowledge it in community events.”

“Representing the Iranian community, they are very educated (degrees and masters), at face value they do understand and they understand it is everyone’s responsibility to uphold these values. It’s also evident in the community of refugees. I myself am a first generation refugee and freedom of speech, expression, religion — we cannot take these things for granted and we don’t want history to repeat itself.”

“I’d like to see my community be more active, have more volunteers, and support each other better.”

“Primarily Muslim South East Asian community — there is quite a lot of disparity between Australian values and our previous traditional communities. Growing up there was always a dichotomy between these two. I’d say my community understands Australian values but not necessarily the responsibilities. They understand what is valued by wider Australia. But perhaps not responsible for upholding certain qualities. They are focused on being themselves rather than abiding by these Australian values.”

## Question 2: Are there some values that seem more important than others?

There was general consensus among the young people regarding the importance of civil liberties and respect of all individuals as expressed in the Australian Values statement. However, individuals within the focus group made the observation that the sentiments outlined in the values aren’t necessarily acknowledged by everyone — even Government.

Young people also noted how their personal experiences influence their opinion regarding which value they deemed most ‘important’, acknowledging that the generation before them may feel differently due their personal contexts.

“Any democracy you want to see succeed starts off with giving the individual the freedom. Let them live the life they see fit, as long as they don’t break laws. Acknowledge every human is born with certain rights, including freedom, being treated with respect, a person with worth — we have to start by respecting others in order to achieve the other values.”

“For people who left Iran after the revolution, freedom of speech is extremely important. For my generation, respect and dignity is more important.”

## A fair go

It was made clear by some of young people’s responses that there was not a singular or universal understanding or definition of the expression ‘a fair go’. Some people interpreted it as access to material securities such as food and shelter. This brings into question what ‘a fair go’ looks like in the supposed ‘developed’ nation like Australia. It was also noted that in fact many people in this country do not receive ‘a fair go’.

“The ‘fair go’ concept where it is completely equal (food on the table, shelter for everyone) — these are extremely important. Iranian refugees haven’t been able to have that.”

“When applying for a job or getting a scholarship and you say who you are, where you’re from — I don’t see this value being acknowledged the same as the others. I believe that equity is more important than the others because if we are not standing on the equal line, how can we speak out or how can we see a different view?”

### First Nations sovereignty

Some participants found it difficult to isolate a value they felt was ‘most important’ but there was particular discussion and agreement amongst the young people that by only including English as the national language without acknowledgement of the hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and dialects, the culture and sovereignty of First Nations peoples was diminished.

“It was hard for me to choose one that was MORE important than the other, but the one I least valued was the English language as the national one. I think this does not recognise the sovereignty of our First Nations Peoples, and the languages that they are fighting to maintain.”

**Question 3: With reference to values, what are the advantages when Australians live by these values? What are the disadvantages when they are not followed?**

### Importance of interpersonal respect

When speaking about both advantages and disadvantages of Australians living by the identified Australian values, young people gravitated towards, and put a large emphasis on, the benefits and consequences of values relating to interpersonal relationships, individual civil liberties and respect. For example, respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual; equity of opportunity for all people, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, race, or national or ethnic origin.

Advantages of following these humanist values were discussed by the group as leading to equitable opportunities, an effective society where people aren’t hindered by disrespect, and a communal society with improved quality of life for all. Young people also pointed to potential disintegration of social cohesion and systems as disadvantages when people do not live by those values.

“If everyone can live by these values we’ll be more efficient — there won’t be ethical barriers and we can respect each other. This will give us a nice environment to live in. We’ll be more organised.”

“Advantage is equality, no perception of who is better than the other, no one is discriminated against, everyone gets that fair go, mutual respect. When they are not followed, that social cohesion falls apart. Values such as these are important because we are so multicultural. It could be “totalitarian rule”. We may all fall apart and we constantly disrespect each other.”

“We’d be united through our diversity rather than despite it. Disadvantages would be the exclusion of people who don’t ‘fit the image’ of Australia and there would be more racism. Exclusion means actively oppressing people who have contributions to give. It’s basic respect to others.”

“People wouldn’t be at risk of far-right extremism attacking their places of worship, international students wouldn’t be homeless due to the COVID, greater advantage would

be to look at the neighbour across the street and not question whether they respect you or not.”

## Language

During the discussion there were strong opinions regarding potential disadvantages stemming from promoting the English language as the only language within the values. It was observed that by not acknowledging the wide range of languages spoken in Australia, including the many hundreds of languages and dialects spoken by First Nations people prior to colonisation, we are diminishing what is a strength of this nation. It could potentially create more opportunities for discrimination and seems to directly conflict with other values proposed in the statement.

Young people pointed to poor English skills not being an indicator of one’s willingness to learn, or their effort to date. Young people also feared the status of English being used as justification to discriminate those with low English skills, as a reason to push not speaking other languages in public, or not teaching other languages in schools.

Though the participants acknowledged the importance of English in regards to building relationships within Australia and that those learning English should be supported as much as possible, participants highlighted that the benefits of people having freedom to practice their culture, including language, was more important and beneficial to social cohesion than the benefits of everyone being ‘unified’ by the English language.

“I think the disadvantage of not knowing English is less damaging than not having freedom or democracy. We should encourage people to learn English, but support them regardless of the fact that they’re learning English. We’re a country of many cultures so we should acknowledge that.”

“As International students, my friends and I cannot speak English very well. We keep learning. There are some learning programs. This helps us pick up these skills. Using English as a national language is very important because you can communicate with everyone in your life — although some people may not speak English — these language barriers exist when trying to create a relationship with new people.”

“It’s important to learn the English language. However, there has to be an understanding for people like my mother. I don’t want her to be discriminated against because she really is trying. There’s a fine line between not wanting to speak, but trying and not being able to.”

## Perception of Australia’s current relationship to these values

Young people brought into question the concept of the Australian Values document, citing that these values do not reflect current Australian society in their experience.

“Why do we have this Australian Values Statement but not a charter of human rights? Visa applicants must sign this — but how many regular Australian citizens must sign this? I feel that on the street, I see disrespect. Education and public awareness needs to happen more often.”

“Migrants and refugees probably know more about these Australian Values than citizens do. This statement does not really reflect the Australian society. If I answer this with sincerity, I don’t see many examples of where this is being enacted with integrity.”



#### 4. Do you identify with these values and feel a sense of inclusion through them?

Young people in general said they felt a sense of inclusion both through these values and in their everyday experiences, with the exception of experiences searching for work. The group expressed that the proposed values were generally positive and important ideals.

**“I’ve done some travelling in Australia, everyone seems to be really nice and accept the fact that we are a nation of many cultures. Everyone is given a fair shot despite different religions, ages and sexualities. Everyone has been given a fair shot and that is what makes our country a lot better than others. There’s more that unites us rather than there are differences. This makes me feel important.”**

**“I feel like I am rarely excluded and I’ve never been rejected by the way I look. These values are integral to society and everyone knows that.”**

#### Non-Inclusion and potential areas of improvement

As in the earlier questions, the participants expressed that the value concerning English as a unifying force was incompatible with the rest of the values. English is the language of colonisation and while it is useful in its status as a common language, it is also divisive if other languages are not acknowledged and our multi-lingualism is not seen as a strength. Some young people noted that in their experience they did not see English as a unifying element of Australia. Others also pointed to the idea that Australia could be doing more to combat discrimination.

**“We as a country can do better in making sure no one is discriminated against.”**

**“I don’t see English as a ‘unifying element’ of Australia. It is contradictory to the ‘fair go’ statement. Surely if we can recognise the multicultural nature of our society, we can also recognise the multilingual.”**

**“In the last census there were 350 languages spoken in Australia. If we single out one language that isn’t one of the traditional languages that was here thousands of years ago, I think it directly excludes a large portion of the country.”**

**“It was the English that silenced thousands of stolen generations. We have apps now that can help us translate, why should it be English the unifying language when historically it has divided society and the First Nations.”**

#### Employment and job searching

Despite participants reporting that they generally felt included by the values and how they were expressed in their day to day lives, a number of young people pointed to instances of exclusion they experienced as they searched for work. Young people noted that they felt their residency status often made them less desirable to employers. In addition, often being the only ‘diverse’ candidate made them hyper-aware of their status as a person from a culturally diverse community.

**“Yes and yes — I feel included but a little part of me feels like an outsider when I go to apply for a job and they ask if I am a resident or citizen here. I feel excluded because of my visa condition. I don’t feel excluded because of my ability but because of my residency status. The rule is they want long-term commitment in the form of a visa.”**

“I do identify with these values, they are valid. We can be more inclusive, more functional, give a fair go and live the life we want to. But I do feel a sense of exclusion, as a person of colour, sometimes it is hard not to feel odd. I’m at a job interview and everyone else in the waiting room is not diverse or ethnic like me.”

## 5. What practical actions could the Australian Government take to promote values?

The participants commented that the document itself was simple and easy to understand. However, young people highlighted that these values were not being promoted or part of a national dialogue. They highlighted the importance of facilitating widespread discussion of the values — what they look like in practice — to ensure there is a whole of population understanding. They also felt this would be best achieved with tandem campaigns around anti-discrimination and anti-racism.

“I didn’t hear of the ‘Australian Values’ until this week when I heard about this consultation. Maybe distribute some information. Get students to understand these values during school orientation. I see companies when hiring that they encourage all people to apply. Government offers English learning class.”

“Videos / films have always been Anglo-Saxon people, we need more diversity out there as role models. Widespread conversation regarding the values would boost the values. Talking to people that represent various communities. Talking to elders that have positions in community. Forums and panels etc.”

“I don’t think we can achieve 100% equality in this country— we need baby steps to get there and anti-discrimination policies are part of this.”

“The wording of this document is simple, straightforward and easy to understand.”

## Civic participation and more democratic processes

Young people expressed the need for more initiatives directly connecting people to all spheres of government, minimising the distance between the people and their representatives to foster strong democratic processes. One accessible suggestion included digital town halls. Some individuals pointed to wanting to be more involved and better understand the political system without having to join a youth contingent of a major party.

“Virtual town halls from state members, local council and federal government. Some people are turned off from making a phone call to an MP’s office. Everyone is invited so that questions and answers can be done directly.”

“The meetings are beneficial for everyone to realise that politicians work for us.”

“Directly hearing from members is extremely important.”

“I noticed that there was a Young Labor and Young Liberal group to join. I found it odd that there were only those two parties where young people could join. We should have more interaction with political parties on campus.”

## Increase funding to community groups

The group acknowledged the importance of multicultural and Indigenous events and celebrations in instilling and promoting Australian values, as well as the central role community groups play in

organising these events. Young people felt increased government funding to community groups to continue and increase these initiatives was important. It was also noted that government should seek to build a stronger rapport with community groups, in particular older, more established members.

**“More events and celebrations e.g. NAIDOC could be more genuine and there’s none in my community outside of the schooling context. More events organised by the government or funding community groups to run events.”**

**“Get involved with elders. Communities have respect for their elders, they are the ones that promote events and spread the word. This is the best way to go about it, because with age — it’s a big thing in the community. Whatever the elder says, is the accepted approach. The best way to establish rapport is by attending events and community organisations and programs that already exist. The Iranian community is very much word of mouth.”**

### **Promotion through schooling**

Young people spoke to the potential of school based programs in promoting the values. The group pointed to the value of more in-depth and long term learning programs as opposed to one off seminars or speakers.

The group suggested primary and secondary schools to introduce Indigenous language programs and a more inclusive approach to ‘scripture’ classes. With some participants questioning why scripture wasn’t a place to learn about all religions in order to better understand one another.

**“Why do we have some scripture classes to some religions whilst other students have to do non-scripture? It should be a system where you learn about every single religion and culture.”**

**“Studying Indigenous languages from an early age — being multilingual is not to be looked down upon, it should be valued. This is what Australia is made of, this is what our human experience is made of.”**

**“My primary school had guest speakers come into the school to discuss respect and racism so people can understand.”**

**“We should be having more discussions, rather than just listening to a person that comes to a school. We should analyse and look at what these values mean to us rather than taking it at face value.”**

## **6. Do you have any further comments about Australian Values?**

### **Potential hypocrisy of values document**

On the whole young people felt positively about the values themselves and the opportunity to comment on them in such a setting. However, there was considerable suspicion of the intent of the values statement and whether new arrivals would be required to sign it or if it would be used to discriminate against people.

The group were very aware of and pointed to the inequality of those already in Australia not having to sign a similar social contract. The group’s discussion heavily focussed on the privileged position of

those with citizenship and that it is a pathway denied to many of them and that this document would be a tool to 'other' people without citizenship.

A number of participants brought up Australia's lack of a Human Rights Charter, Bill of Rights or Treaty with First Nations peoples as practical ways the government could enact these very values.

**"Immigrants and refugees, people with temporary visas — they're expected to sign these statements and have certain behaviours, but our government is also meant to uphold these values. We need to have a Human Rights Charter promising us that we will all be treated the same way. We've seen throughout the pandemic, we saw certain people did NOT get protected with these values."**

**"Just because you are born a citizen, you aren't always a responsible citizen. I don't think anyone should be signing anything. Reflecting on where we are now, we should not be signing a 'contract-like' thing."**

**"I want to stress that a Human Rights Charter and a Treaty would ensure that even the Australian Government is holding themselves accountable to the same values they preach. Those seeking asylum and those wanting to become citizens, they need to complete a citizenship test. How many average Australians would be able to complete that? The fair go has to be applicable to every single person, whether it's a person seeking asylum, whether they are moving here or are born here, whether they are Indigenous. Every single person should know about the basic citizenship test and uphold values."**