



**M Y S A**  
Multicultural Youth SA Inc

# Good Practice Paper

## *MY Connections Project*

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## **PURPOSE OF THE PAPER**

Based on the key learnings of the *MY Connections* project, this paper aims to provide insights into the complex issues affecting refugee youth at risk to help the service providers, service planners and new and emerging communities to more effectively engage and support them.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND OVERVIEW**

Multicultural Youth South Australia Inc. (MYSA) was funded by Department of Immigration and Citizenship's Emerging Issues Funding program to deliver *MY Connections*, a two-year project that began in 2009 and concluded in 2011. The project was supported by a reference group comprising the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Families SA (Youth Justice Team), Families SA Refugee Services, the African Communities Council SA, the South Australia Police, the Liberian Community and the Multicultural Communities Council SA.

Young refugees who are the most at risk of social disengagement and exclusion are generally the least likely to access community services, resources and support. MYSA's research and direct service delivery work with refugees has revealed that there are groups of hidden young people who are living on the margins of society and not participating in community life.

The term "at risk youth" has traditionally been used to refer to a range of different population groups including young offenders, homeless youth, adolescents with social and behavioural problems, and teenage mothers. For the purposes of this project, the term is used to refer to youth who may or may not have social and behavioural problems, but who are experiencing certain negative conditions which may make them vulnerable to such problems.

The purpose of the project was to increase linkages, connections, and bridges between the refugee youth and general Australian community, ultimately resulting in reciprocal understanding and respect, and improved community relations.

The aims of the project were to:

- Build the capacity of individual youth at risk;
- Build capacity in the refugee and mainstream community to strengthen support networks for youth at risk;
- Improve and increasing life opportunities for youth at risk through increased linkages, relationships and connections with resources and support;
- Increase the capacity of mainstream agencies to support, respond and connect with youth at risk;
- Promote positive images of refugee youth in the wider community to strengthen social cohesion, community harmony and cross cultural understanding

## **KEY LEARNINGS OF THE PROJECT**

The following information features the key learning's from the *MY Connections* project.

### **Forums – taking it to the next level**

#### *Genuine engagement and consultation*

A key process of youth participation is consultation with young people and thus allowing young people to take an active role in decision making and contribute positively to the community and their lives. It is this process which ensures that young people are not only seen and heard but have equal opportunity to actively participate in outlining issues of importance which impact on their everyday lives. Moreover, when working with refugee youth at risk this process becomes crucial in ascertaining prevalent issues that are present and impact severely on young people not only in effectively engaging with youth supports but the community as well.

The MY Connections project piloted a new and innovative way of consulting and addressing these issues in partnership with refugee young people at risk. This was delivered through a series of roundtable forums where refugee youth at risk were supported by mainstream youth leaders and MYSA staff to discuss issues of importance.

In turn this process allowed for refugee youth at risk to meet and draw from mainstream youth leaders which provided an imperative access point for positive role models. In previous MYSA research, access to positive role models was identified as a key barrier identified by refugee young people to positively participating in the community and reaching their full potential.

The other successful strategy employed was that of refugee youth at risk developing action plans as a way of addressing issues discussed at the roundtable forums. This aimed to instil a greater sense of ownership.

The strategy of addressing issues was undertaken through the development of a community project. The youth at risk that were involved in all of the round table forums, comprising of three in total, were then invited to join MYSA and form a project team which lead and ensured that the issues identified were addressed with solutions the young people suggested. This was highly successful when engaging youth at risk as it allowed for them to see that the forums were not just a way of MYSA gaining information. This approach enabled young people to see the process from beginning to end, from problem identification to implementation and in even evaluation of their projects success.

#### *A youth led approach*

Building rapport and trust with refugee youth at risk can be a long process and at time a major hindrance when attempting to support them in dealing with issues or reaching their goals. In creating opportunities where refugee youth at risk are given the supports to be actively involved in not only addressing their own issues but issues of their friends and other young people, two successful projects were delivered with the significant support of refugee youth at risk for refugee youth at risk.

The success of these community projects, are a result of a youth led approach. Research has shown that some of the most vulnerable refugee youth are disengaged from their own communities. The chance for youth at risk to be engaged and supported to lead strategies for the wider community, surprisingly was a an opportunity wholeheartedly taken up by young people as a way to actively participate and support other refugee youth at risk thrive.

With the continual and consistent support, motivation and encouragement the participants who at the time of the project were dealing with issues of homelessness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, truancy and family breakdown, were seen to seize the genuine opportunity provided where they could take greater control in creating strategies which are best suited to effectively address their most important issues.

### *Collaborating with community*

Apart from creating opportunities where young people were consulted, MYSA also initiated a series of roundtable forums with new and emerging community leaders, mainstream leaders and refugee youth at risk.

The overall success of the forums, with young people at risk, their community leaders and representatives and the mainstream community has highlighted the importance of providing avenues to discuss issues of importance through a supported environment. A 'supported environment' being the optimal component here.

By allowing mainstream and new and emerging leaders to come together to inform each other and impart critical information, has highlighted the importance of creating opportunities where genuine partnerships can be formed. An increase in knowledge regarding each other, especially pertaining to the youth supports that may exist within the mainstream community creates avenues for long term outcomes to be formed for young people at risk and their communities. By engaging community leaders and providing a supportive mechanism to commence the engagement of young people, especially those quite at risk, has been highly successful due to the nature of issues discussed, but also providing a structured and supportive starting point of engagement.

Providing opportunities where the broader community is able to show support for new and emerging communities and their young has proven efficient in promoting the genuine care and commitment the wider community has to refugee young people and their communities.

Structured and supportive forums of engagement to building rapport and trust between community leaders, their young people and mainstream community has substantiated to MYSA that opportunities like this are highly important when attempting to create sustainable long term outcomes for refugee youth at risk.

Moreover, by investing in building the capacity of new and emerging communities to further develop the necessary skills and knowledge in order to effectively engage

with their youth populations will ultimately create a more supportive environment for refugee youth at risk that belong to these communities.

Whilst the overall aims of the roundtable forums were successful, a key challenge has been identified which created significant barriers in the engagement process of community/youth leaders. The key challenge which was identified by both refugee youth at risk and community elders, is the unfortunate occurrence of 'gate keeping' by agencies in the community services sector. In this case gate keeping refers to the negative environment created by agencies that are controlling the extent of involvement of community/youth leaders' due to significant conflict of interest. The conflict of interest arises where the community/youth leaders have been successful in gaining employment in these agencies, however then are limited in being able to engage with other agencies to support their communities.

As one community leader stated *"That youth leader would lose his job if they were to come to this forum, the community/youth leader is just not allowed"*.

With another community youth leader stating *"that agency cannot come to this community initiative as another agency is paying for it"*.

### **Camps with a difference**

When engaging refugee youth at risk, MYSA has learnt that providing social and recreational opportunities is a key strategy when building rapport and trust. This is crucial when attempting to support refugee youth at risk especially those young people that are significantly disengaged and unfortunately fall through the 'gaps' and live on the margins of our society.

Through the MY Connections project MYSA delivered a series of camps for both female and male youth at risk however a key difference being that young people took a strong leadership role throughout the camp. This meant that young people were involved in all aspects of the camp, including having responsibility for each other and general running of the camp with involvement in cooking, cleaning, maintenance of campsite and ensuring camp rules are maintained.

The introduction of inter-action learning through a camp environment provided young people with the opportunity to develop a range of skills including communication, leadership, team work and independent living skills.

This was a successful strategy of engaging young people at risk who through practical activities were able to develop key skills needed in order to feel more confident and ultimately better placed to take greater control of their lives. Refugee youth at risk when given the chance in a supported environment to take a leadership role, showed great enthusiasm and strove to showcase their abilities and skills.

The camps have further confirmed to MYSA, that the strategy of engaging young people through a supported environment whereby they can escape their everyday lives, even for two days, not only allows the crucial trust and rapport to be built, but creates a unique opportunity for service providers to impart crucial information through action learning, which can only increase the chance of refugee young people re-engaging their own and the wider community.

## **Mentor Program**

The MY Connections Mentor Program offered another unique avenue for young people at risk to be engaged and therefore form critical informal supports. The sports and recreation activities played a pivotal role in young people's increasing their self esteem, confidence, self belief and overall outlook on life. In turn young people were better placed to form positive informal support networks which also play an important role for young people to reach their goals and life ambitions.

The mentor program, delivered through a non traditional approach, where young people and mentors were engaged in group activities was highly successful in creating a platform for young people at risk to access positive role models. Having the opportunity to meet community members who offer support and motivation created a successful path for young people to commence the process of re engaging back with the community.

Even though the program was highly successful in engaging young people at risk, MYSA encountered a major challenge which impacted severely on the program. As the program was based on a volunteer basis, this posed major issues in gaining long term commitment from the mentors and the overall retention of the mentors. This meant that mentor availability changed throughout the program, many disengaging due to over commitment, finding employment and / or family commitments.

This was a significant barrier in MYSA being able to provide a consistent positive role model to young people at risk, with many young people having their mentor changed several times. This also caused major disruptions to young people forming effective long term support networks with some questioning '*why did he just leave, did I do something?*' (Male, 15 years). Having mentors disengage from the program at critical stages of rapport and trust building or just after the fact posed significant barriers for young people to effectively and positively engage in the program.

It is with this in mind, that MYSA is proposing that any future Mentor Program must be sufficiently resourced in order for young people to receive the full benefits of a mentor program. By ensuring appropriate funds are available means that mentors will more likely engage for the duration of the program and issues associated with volunteering will be mitigated. This will also lower the high turnover of mentors and will provide a better chance for young people at risk to engage with one consistent positive role model. Overall this will ensure that young people at risk will not have to endure the limitations of a volunteer program and will have more chance of effectively engaging with the community and its supports.

## **M.Y Music and Culture Festival – Much more than a talent quest**

Refugee young people at risk are talented, driven, motivational and most of all resilient. Creating opportunities where they can showcase this not only to the wider community but to their own community was a key strategy undertaken through the MY Connections Project. It is this innovative idea, a concept developed by young people themselves, that has again proven to MYSA that refugee young people at risk thrive when given the opportunity to showcase their talents.

It is not very often that refugee young people at risk are positively represented in the media nor are given the chance to take control and be supported to create a way where they can showcase positive images. The creation of a festival whereby it is youth driven and only for young people, proved to be a successful strategy in creating opportunities for refugee youth at risk to engage in positive activities and thus create avenues where they can showcase their talents, enthusiasm, drive and creativity.

The festival, which was a Harmony Day event, created an opportunity for young people to navigate back to the community, make links and increase the chance of refugee youth at risk re-linking with their own community and mainstream community supports. The festival was a success due to its conception by young people and their genuine drive to show the community that they have something to contribute and that they do matter. As one young person stated *"Getting out there and showing everybody that I am not stupid like they think, getting the chance to show them that you know I can dance, is a great feeling"* (Male 18 yrs)

### **Membership – a new way of engaging youth at risk**

A consistent message that refugee youth at risk have stated is the negative association they feel with the mainstream term of 'clients'. Unfortunately the negative association with this term meant that refugee young people were less likely to engage because of a fear of being seen of needing support and they would be stereotyped within the community as having issues. This in turn meant that they were scared of even further being disconnected from their own informal support mechanisms.

The notion of membership is most often used for participants of sports and recreation clubs and various types of associations with the term 'member' creating a perception of belonging. It is with this in mind that MYSA will be proposing a new strategy which will see MYSA move away from traditional terminology and move towards a more inclusive system of engaging refugee youth at risk.

By utilising the term membership and putting in place an avenue whereby statistical collection will be collected via membership cards for first and foremost this will increase the opportunity for those refugee youth at risk to feel a sense of belonging. Therefore creating a community in its self, whereby young people are not stereotyped by terminology such as 'clients' and as the refugee youth at risk state, embarrassed when referred to as a client.

MYSA hopes that by moving towards a membership strategy, that it will create more effective ways of engaging with those young refugee people most at risk, who at times do not engage with service providers due to a fear of being seen as a failure and a further outcast.

By ensuring that every young person who utilises MYSA services, supports and information receives a membership card which will be utilised to access the wide range

of supports and services, means that MYSA will create many more opportunities for refugee young people at risk who are fully disconnected to engage with MYSA indirectly and more discreetly.

A greater equality and a more confidential setting will be created by utilising the membership approach therefore utilising the term member rather than client; young people will feel more in control of their privacy and confidentiality. It will also mean that youth at risk will not be subjected to stereotypes and feel less vulnerable due to not being associated with the term client and all its negative associations.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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- Department of Immigration and Citizenship (South Australia)
- South Australian Police
- Department of Families and Communities (Families SA - Restitution Services)
- Department for Families & Communities (Families SA - Refugee Services)
- African Communities Council of SA Inc
- Multicultural Communities Council of SA
- Liberian Community of SA Inc

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