



Considering Consulting?

A brief guide to meaningful consultation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds

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Why consult?

Consultation is a tool used by government and non-government agencies to gain insight into the views and opinions of whole or specific segments of the community. For young people whose perspectives are often marginalised or ignored, this is a particularly powerful form of participation that enables their “voices” to be heard by the government, their peers and the broader community. Consultation provides young people with an opportunity to influence decision making and planning. For young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds—particularly those most recently arrived in Australia—consultation can provide an important tool by which they may advocate for their own needs. Successful consultation with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds requires particular consideration and planning. This information sheet is designed to ensure that such consultation processes are effective, culturally appropriate and accessible.

Benefits of effective consultation

Benefits for young people include:

- Meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes;
- A forum to articulate their needs and aspirations;
- Opportunities for increased participation in activities offered by youth services;
- Increased knowledge of services, policy issues, community and government structures.

Benefits for government and non-government agencies include:

- Increased quality of service provision to all young people living in Victoria;
- More inclusive policy development;
- Planning and program design practices that are more informed and therefore better reflect the needs of refugee and migrant young people.

To avoid the tokenistic involvement of young people it is important to be clear on intended outcomes, the limits of consultation and that consultation is only one strategy for youth participation. Depending on your goals it may be more productive and meaningful for young

people to be included in a program or organisational reference group rather than their ‘one off’ input in a consultation process.

Barriers to effective consultation

Refugee and migrant young people often experience barriers to participation that Australian-born young people do not face. It is important that these barriers are well understood by consultants to ensure an inclusive and accessible consultation process.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds may:

....**lack awareness of Australian structures, systems, institutions and cultural assumptions.** Participants may hold values that differ from commonly assumed concepts such as democracy, adolescence and individualism. Some refugee and migrant young people may not be used to adults asking for their opinion on issues. “Speaking out” on issues may not be seen as appropriate.

....**have competing priorities and responsibilities.** Refugee and migrant young people are often very busy with learning English, school work, family responsibilities and employment.

....**have limited English language skills.** Refugee young people with interrupted or no schooling may also not be literate in their first language.

....**have had limited or previous negative experiences of consultation.** They may not be familiar with consultation processes or be skeptical and believe that minimal or no change will occur.

....**experience financial difficulties.** They may be looking for work, sending money to relatives overseas, have a large family, or be reliant on Centrelink. Transport costs involved in a consultation may be prohibitive.

....**lack confidence in saying what they need and have difficulties understanding the consultation process.** Many newly-arrived young people may have had little if any experience of a consultation process in their country of origin. In addition, navigating an unfamiliar and complex social system as well as a new language and culture may have an impact in the ability of a young person to contribute to any consultation process.





....**experience gendered expectations.** Cultural norms for young women and men may impact on their availability for consultation.

....**face difficulties getting parental permission.** Parents often fear for the safety of their children and may have suspicion or concern about consultation processes.

There are also a range of organisational barriers impacting on the effectiveness of services seeking to consult with them.

Organisations may have:

Inappropriate methods. Data collection methods that require sophisticated language ability or which utilise concepts unfamiliar to refugee and migrant young people are likely to be ineffective.

Limited cross-cultural skills. Consultants who are inexperienced or unaware of the needs and experiences of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds will be less effective in communicating cross-culturally. Inability to provide tailored information (i.e. plain English documents, translated information, appropriate consent processes) will also impact on the success of the consultation. Lack of familiarity with the use of interpreters is a common failure of consultation processes with refugee and migrant young people. Effective use of interpreters requires training and an understanding of the complexities involved.

The values, attitudes and behaviour of consultants may also inhibit the effectiveness of the consultation. Consultants need to be aware of their own cultural assumptions and those implicit in the research framework or planned approach.

Planning a culturally sensitive consultation

The following steps are intended to provide some guidance in planning a culturally sensitive consultation.

Identifying young people to be consulted. Consider which cultural groups and which young people from within those groups you want to consult with. Things to consider include age range, locality, educational or work status and length of time in Australia. Once participants have been chosen the consultant should endeavour to learn as much as possible about the group including their cultural and linguistic diversity.

Recruiting young people. The most effective avenue for engaging refugee and migrant young people in consultations is to ensure that the process is linked to an existing group or organisation that may provide ongoing support and opportunities for the young person. Options for recruiting participants include:

- Paying young people. This can be a key recruitment tool and acknowledges the knowledge and skills that young people bring;
- Reimbursing costs incurred such as transport, time off work etc;

- Accessing young people through schools and language centers or through settlement support services;
- Linking with community groups/organisations for e.g. The Karen youth association;
- Outreaching to where young people's areas of interest are, such as recreation or youth centers and shopping precincts;
- Working with young leaders to develop, plan and facilitate the consultation.

Choosing the best method. Consultation methods include individual and group consultations, telephone interviews and surveys. Refer to CMY's more detailed *Considering Consulting* resource referenced below for a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of each method.

Ethical considerations. Obtaining informed consent is a key ethical and legal requirement and should involve provision to participants, at their level of comprehension, information about the purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconvenience, discomforts and possible outcomes of the research. Informed consent should also involve the exercise of voluntary choice to participate. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) outlines ethical principals to consider in conducting research. These guidelines can be accessed at: www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/humans/contents.htm.

Consent

In obtaining consent, the young person's level of spoken English and literacy levels needs to be taken into consideration. It may be appropriate to provide information about the consultation through an interpreter.

In some cases (e.g. young people under 18) you will also need to gain the consent of parents/legal guardians. In some communities it may also be appropriate to obtain support from community leaders. For parent consent forms in 15 community languages see www.cmy.net.au/ResourcesfortheSector#Forms

Informing families. Seek to communicate with the family of the young person. Provide information about the consultation and directly address parents' concerns in relation to missing school, transport, supervision and mixed gender activities. You could make a phone call using a telephone interpreter and/or provide a translated letter. Support for the consultation can also be communicated to families through community leaders, teachers and youth workers.

Supporting young people. It is important to consider whether or not the consultation could involve risks, inconveniences and discomfort for the young people. For example, is the consultation likely to bring up memories of trauma experienced prior to settlement in Australia? Take steps to minimise risks and have procedures in places if they do occur.





Language and literacy issues. Information should also be provided in written form for the young person to take away in a language that is most suitable for them. Planning should include establishing the range of languages spoken by the young people. Young people with limited education may need simple explanations of concepts like 'voluntary,' 'consent' and 'consultation.'

Use interpreters and translated material when needed and be mindful of booking interpreters in advance. Offer a young professional interpreter where possible, and an interpreter of the same gender when running a gender specific consultation. Before the consultation it is important to brief the interpreter on the purpose of the consultation and build a shared understanding of the issues and concepts involved.

Co-facilitation with a bicultural youth worker, who shares a common language with the participants and is able to communicate in this language at a level appropriate to the role of youth worker and facilitator, is an alternative way of running the consultation.

Choosing a venue. Talk to agencies working with refugee and migrant young people about an appropriate venue. If possible, go to where young people live or socialise, rather than expecting participants to come to you. Ascertain whether prayer rooms are required and if so, ensure they are available.

Transport. Newly-arrived refugee and migrant young people may not be familiar with local transport. It is important to help facilitate transport arrangements and where necessary, to provide metcards to cover the cost of their participation. Safety considerations should be paramount. Consider choosing a location accessible by public transport and organising to meet groups of young people at a designated place to catch public transport together. Alternatively, choose a location accessible by public transport and explain to young people how to get there.

Timing. Ensure the consultation process does not clash with young people's responsibilities and religious and cultural activities.

Catering. Provide some food and non-alcoholic drinks. Prior to the consultation try to establish which foods may be most appropriate by talking to young people, their families and workers and/or asking young people to specify particular dietary requirements (i.e. halal) on the consent form.

Carrying out a culturally sensitive consultation

Make it a meaningful and flexible process. Allow young people to identify a support person to attend the consultation if required, as well as offering a professional interpreter. Using a peer co-facilitation model with a young person who has been trained in this role is a good way to engage participants. Listening to the young people and providing feedback on what they are saying throughout the process is vital.

Try different approaches. Break the group up into smaller groups, or pairs, but vary it with larger group activities. Engage young people in fun activities and warm up games to make connections. Be mindful of different levels of literacy and familiarity with group processes when selecting a suitable activity. Provide a mix of activities that include cognitive, visual and physical elements and always be mindful of your use of language. Use expressions that young people will be familiar with and avoid complex language and jargon.

Be aware of group dynamics. Being able to read and interpret group dynamics and think on your feet is integral to a successful consultation. Making changes on the spot to the process based on an accurate reading of the dynamics can make a significant difference.

Create a sense of safety and respect. Create an environment that is respectful, nurturing and safe. Developing a group agreement that identifies ground rules for the consultation and strategies for dealing with any issues that arise may be helpful.

Evaluate your process. Try to keep the evaluation simple and remember that many newly-arrived young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds may be reluctant to use paper-based evaluation. Evaluate both during and after the consultation process. Acting on feedback and suggestions from the young people during the consultation process helps build trust and respect. You can also evaluate through people known to the young people such as teachers and support workers.

Provide feedback. Ensure feedback is provided to participants as part of the consultation. Young people will become disillusioned with consultation processes if they do not receive feedback or follow up. Ask young people about the most effective ways to provide feedback (for example, face-to-face, over the phone, sms, email or internet) as well as appropriate languages in which feedback should be provided. Try to maintain a link with the young people after the process and be mindful of ways that you can continue to facilitate opportunities for their meaningful participation in the broader community.

Further resources

Considering Consulting is available as a longer and more detailed resource at: www.cmy.net.au/Assets/170/1/ConsideringConsulting.pdf.

CMY contributed to the development of *Consulting Young People about their Ideas and Opinions: A Handbook for Organisations Working with Young People*, YACVic, 2004, which can be downloaded from www.yacvic.org.au/sector/detail-participation.chtml?filename_num=258084. This information sheet can be used in conjunction with this handbook.

Singer, E. & Chandra-Shekeran, K. (2006), *Leading Themselves: Refugee Youth Participation - Learnings and Challenges in Just Policy*, No. 39, March 2006.

www.vcross.org.au/pubs/just-policy.htm.

