



**Submission to the Legislative Assembly for the
Australian Capital Territory Standing Committee on
Education, Training and Youth Affairs**

Inquiry into the accommodation needs of tertiary
education students in the ACT

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1. Introduction

Multicultural Youth Services (MYS) assist newly arrived refugees and migrants with accommodation, education, training, family issues and any other matters that are important to young people.

The terms of reference most relevant to the MYS submission are:

Term of Reference 3: Student experiences of current accommodation options in the ACT, including the experiences of local, interstate and international students.

Term of Reference 7: General factors influencing availability and access to appropriate accommodation for the core demographic group (18 – 25 year olds)

Refugee and migrant young people engaged in tertiary education in the ACT are particularly vulnerable to housing stress and homelessness. Stable, safe and appropriate accommodation is fundamental to young peoples' educational achievement, employment pathways, access to services, wellbeing and successful resettlement.¹ However, the Centre for Multicultural Youth reported in 2010 that refugee young people are six to ten times more likely than other young people to be at risk of homelessness nationally.² Multicultural youth homelessness is often invisible: like their peers in other states, MYS clients commonly couch surf with family, friends and new acquaintances, moving frequently between a number of overcrowded homes. Backgrounds of loss and displacement impact have a major effect on migrant and refugee young peoples' accommodation experiences. For these young people, family disruption, cultural dislocation and settlement challenges compound the difficulty many Australian youth have securing appropriate accommodation. Multicultural youth join Canberra's homeless population, 60 per cent of whom are under the age of 25 years.³ MYS clients face a number of barriers to accessing appropriate accommodation including the cost and availability of private rental properties and on-campus student accommodation, discrimination in the private market, and limited public housing.

¹ Francis and Cornfoot (2007: 20); and Ransey and Drummond (2001: 46)

² Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 7).

³ Youth Coalition of the ACT (2011: 4).

This submission is based on a review of relevant literature and on informal interviews with multicultural young people engaged in tertiary study in the ACT. These interviews were conducted at the MYS drop-in centre and on-campus at the University of Canberra.

2. Migrant and refugee student accommodation experiences

Young people with refugee and migrant backgrounds come to Australia having already experienced profound homelessness, loss and displacement.⁴ These young people are likely to have spent extended periods living in unsafe and threatening environments, lost or been separated from close family members and friends, and lived for extended periods in impoverished conditions in transition countries and refugee camps.⁵ Refugee and migrant young people face multiple transitions as they resettle in Australia at a significant developmental stage. Vulnerability to social exclusion is amplified at transition points during adolescence and young adulthood, such as the transition from secondary school to tertiary education.⁶ For multicultural youth, transitions and associated accommodation needs can be particularly complex, involving social disadvantage and financial pressure, family reconfiguration, and settlement challenges.

2.1 Overcrowded housing

Young people who have recently arrived in Australia often enter households that are already overcrowded and under financial pressure. Refugee youth describe the financial burden of family separation and the need for them to work part time to support family overseas.⁷ Further, disrupted education, lack of experience and understanding of the Australian job market, and language difficulties are significant barriers to young people's employment.⁸ Financial stress and long public housing waiting lists mean that many MYS clients live in

⁴ Couch (2011: 41).

⁵ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 18-19).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gifford et al (2009: 32)

⁸ Sawrikar et al (2008: 35)

overcrowded, unsustainable situations. These young people tend to move frequently, as housing arrangements breakdown, and may have no choice but to live with relatives or acquaintances who are abusive, or in homes where domestic violence and alcohol or drug abuse occur.⁹

Case Study: Deng

Deng is 25 years old and is undertaking a Bachelor of Medical Science at the University of Canberra. He arrived in Canberra seven years ago, and has lived with his sister and her family in Farrer since then. Including Deng, there are three adults and two young children living in this two-bedroom house. Deng sleeps in the living area, and does not have a space to study at home. The overcrowding at his home is affecting Deng's academic achievement. He applied for public housing in 2008, and has been placed in the high needs category. He visits Housing ACT Gateway regularly, to be told that he is still on the waiting list. Deng's income is Austudy payments, which is not sufficient for him to rent privately or live in on-campus accommodation. Deng cannot study at home and spends a significant proportion of his income on fuel, driving to and from university to attend classes and use the computer labs. Deng would like to live alone so that he can concentrate on his studies.

'Housing is important for students especially. Providing accommodation for students is good for the country; not just for now, but for the next generation.'

Case study: Casey

Casey is currently in year twelve at Dickson College and would like to pursue further studies after she has completed college. Casey is currently staying at the homes of various friends and family members, moving often between houses. She has been couch surfing like this for more than a year. She is in the process of applying for public housing. Next year, Casey intends to work to save money so that she can afford stable accommodation and then enroll in tertiary studies.

2.2 Family reconfiguration and/or lack of adult support

Family disruption and changing household composition can have a significant impact on accommodation experiences for refugee and migrant youth.

Separation from close relatives, as well as family reunion can change family dynamics as roles and responsibilities are re-negotiated.¹⁰ As a recent Centre for Multicultural Youth report regarding refugee and migrant youth homelessness explains:

⁹ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 21).

¹⁰ Gifford et al (2009: 66); and Gedi (2000: 114).

Young people commonly arrive in Australia in family arrangements where family members have not previously lived together or where they have been separated for many years.¹¹

Experiences of loss, trauma, separation, concern for relatives in the country of origin and constantly changing household composition often create family tensions and conflict.¹² Further, divergent acculturation experiences can bring young people and their parents/families into conflict over cultural expectations and discipline.¹³ Reconfigured families resettling in Australia often face multiple pressures that can lead to conflict, breakdown and homelessness, as the following case study demonstrates (Ransley and Drummond 2001: 46).¹⁴ International and interstate students and refugee young people who arrive in Australia with no adult relative often must find, secure and sustain accommodation without adult support.

Case study: Tesefay

Tesefay is 18 years old and arrived in Australia from Ethiopia in January this year. He is currently undertaking a Certificate in English at the Canberra Institute of Technology. Since arriving in Australia, Tesefay has been living with his father. Tesefay has only got to know his father since coming to Australia, and this process has been very difficult for him. As Tesefay and his father do not have a positive or functioning relationship, Tesefay is very unhappy in his current accommodation. He misses his family in Ethiopia, has little social support in Canberra, and has been experiencing depression and anxiety. Tesefay is very keen to find stable, independent accommodation where he can begin building a new life in Canberra. Recently Tesefay was offered a room in temporary shared accommodation, where he will live independently for the first time. He is very excited and looking forward to moving in soon. He intends to continue his studies, learn new living skills, broaden his social support network at CIT and MYS, and join a soccer team.

¹¹ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 19).

¹² Gifford et al (2009: 66-68); and Francis and Cornfoot (2007: 16)

¹³ Coventry et al (2002); and Francis and Cornfoot (2007: 17)

¹⁴ Ransley and Drummond (2001: 46).

3. Factors influencing access and availability of housing for migrant and refugee young people and international students

3.1 Cost of private rental accommodation

The cost of renting through the private market is a significant barrier for multicultural young people to access appropriate accommodation. According to the Youth Coalition of the ACT, 'the private rental market in the ACT is amongst the highest in Australia'.¹⁵ Refugee and migrant tertiary students tend to be under particular financial stress due to obligations to family overseas and barriers to employment such as limited work experience, language difficulties and discrimination. Centrelink payments are often insufficient to cover bonds, rent-in-advance, furniture and the expense of moving. Refugee and migrant families may be unable to support young people financially through this transition.¹⁶ International students may be struggling to meet the costs of tuition fees, living expenses and accommodation. Many MYS clients report financial concerns and homelessness as barriers to achieving their educational goals.

The rent price in ACT is very high. Even if you are sharing with someone you have to pay \$180 per week...One of the biggest challenges is the price of the rent.

U.C. student.

The prices are rising and rising, especially in Canberra because it is a capital city, so the prices are massively increasing...The government can make some rules. The price shouldn't be higher than \$140 per week for students. Being a uni student is not an easy task because you have to focus on your studies first of all, you have this massive pressure from uni, and you have to worry about paying the rent and bills.

U.C. student.

I think the problem is the fees...for the international students they want to find some house with a cheaper price. Most houses in Canberra are quite expensive.

U.C. student.

¹⁵ Youth Coalition of the ACT (2010:1)

¹⁶ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 23)

Case study: Majok

Majok is 21 years old and studying a Bachelor of Building and Construction Management full time at the University of Canberra. Majok came to Australia as a refugee seven years ago and has been living in the ACT for seven months. He is living with three friends in a two bedroom public housing property. His income is Centrelink jobseeker payments. He says that private rental or student accommodation is too expensive for him. He is in the process of applying for social housing.

Case Study: John

John is 23 years old. He lives with his two brothers in private rental accommodation. He pays \$140 per week in rent, the same amount as his brothers who work full time. He is studying Graphic Design at the University of Canberra. He says as a student it is important for him to budget carefully and manage his time.

3.2 Discrimination related to age, culture or ethnicity in the private rental market

In addition to affordability concerns, multicultural young people often face discrimination in the private rental market, and are disadvantaged by their financial and employment status and lack of rental history.¹⁷ Refugee young people involved in a recent consultation placed housing and homelessness as a priority issues and stated that ‘racism is a big problem with real estate agents’.¹⁸ Even where young people can afford to rent privately, they may have great difficulty securing a lease.

Private rental is hard to find. I think it is unfair: students are put at the end of the list.
John, 23yrs, U.C. student.

3.3 Lack of affordable accommodation proximate to university and CIT campuses.

The scarcity of affordable accommodation can push refugee and migrant young people into the outer suburbs, limiting their access to services and public transport and increasing their social isolation. Students who have recently arrived in Australia, or in Canberra, often have a limited community network and few social supports. Adapting to life in a new environment, learning a new

¹⁷ Olliff (2009: 15); and Francis and Cornfoot (2007: 20).

¹⁸ Olliff (2009: 18)

language, and often catching up on years of disrupted schooling can make settlement and education challenging for newly arrived students. Living far from tertiary education campuses can limit students' access to support from teachers, other students, student services and general health, income, and recreational facilities and services.

If you want to find a good place near the university it is very expensive. They must find somewhere very far from the university with a cheaper price. U.C. student.

The biggest challenges I have found since I've moved to the ACT was just simply the cost of accommodation. The most I could afford originally was to rent a single bedroom apartment 30mins away from uni. Since then I've moved in with my partner, which costs about the same. To have somewhere affordable to live, we've had to stay further out. We pay \$370 a week. Anywhere closer to uni would be \$500 plus which is just completely unaffordable. So, I pay less a week in rent but I commute 30 minutes each way to get to uni, which can be a big drain, because that's an hour I've lost each day. U.C. student.

3.4 Cost and lack of culturally appropriate on-campus accommodation

Living on-campus is often unaffordable, unavailable, or not culturally appropriate for migrant and refugee young people. Sharing accommodation with strangers may be very uncomfortable or impossible due to cultural and language needs. Sharing bathrooms, living areas and kitchens with many students can create tensions:

Not all the students in one place, in one house, are having the same background. There are some cultural issues. This is not comfortable for some students. I think that is the biggest challenge. U.C. student.

For me, [if] I share a room with my friend, it must be Chinese. For international students, it is not good for our language if we go to an arranged room: some people who live with you, maybe she or he is a foreigner. I think you have to speak English with the person. Maybe it can improve your English. It can change your culture or lifestyle. U.C. student.

The availability of on-campus accommodation is limited:

It is really difficult to apply for accommodation on campus in because a lot of students want to live on campus because it is quite convenient, to study here. U.C. student.

Finally, the cost of on-campus accommodation is also unaffordable for many multicultural students:

And the fees that the accommodation costs are a quite expensive. Because international students have to pay high education fees for uni, and you have to pay the expensive accommodation fee per week. U.C. student.

3.6 Limited resources lack of cultural competency within the mainstream housing sector

What will change? A lot of people have applied for public housing. They haven't called them.

Majok, 21yrs, U.C. student.

Housing support services are struggling to cope with demand, across Australia, but especially in Canberra. The ACT Department of Housing has the highest turn-away rate of any state at 95 percent, due to a lack of accommodation.¹⁹ Having their housing needs unmet by support services can deter young people from seeking assistance in the future. For refugee and migrant young people, the length of public housing waiting lists 'compounds a sense of despair about the complexity of the system and the scarcity of options at their disposal'.²⁰

It is hoped that MYS's submission to this inquiry provides useful information and insight into the accommodation needs of migrant and refugee tertiary students in the ACT. For further information or inquiries about MYS or this Inquiry submission please contact:

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¹⁹ Youth Coalition of the ACT (2010: 2)

²⁰ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2010: 29)

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