

Submission to the Inquiry into early
childhood engagement of CALD communities

Additional evidence regarding the impact of
the Coronavirus pandemic

June 2020

Submitted to:
Victorian Legislative Assembly, Legal and Social Issues
Committee
June 2020

Overview

AMES Australia (AMES) provides this submission to the Victorian Legislative Assembly, Legal and Social Issues Committee in support of the Inquiry into early childhood engagement of CALD communities. This submission is in addition to AMES submission to the Committee in October 2019, and subsequent evidence presented at the public hearing in Melbourne on Monday 14th October, 2019.

AMES is a statutory authority of the Victorian Government and provides a comprehensive range of settlement services to support newly arrived migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Victoria. AMES also works with community, business and Government to develop sustainable and effective settlement solutions for the whole Victorian community. AMES evidence-based *Settlement Framework for Social and Economic Participation* addresses successful settlement of newly arrived migrants and refugees through four key domains: Employment, Education, Health and Wellbeing, and Safety and Security.

AMES welcomes the opportunity to provide additional evidence on how the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has impacted the delivery, availability, and accessibility of services to families with young children, as well as information dissemination about these services and broader issues relating to COVID-19. AMES submission focuses on three areas specifically; **sources of information, challenges with remote learning, and access to free childcare.**

AMES experience lies in working with migrants and refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and directly, or indirectly, their families; and extensive experience working alongside CALD communities—including direct consultation with mothers from migrant and refugee backgrounds around the terms of this inquiry—and our appraisal of the available research evidence. To inform this additional response, AMES consulted with 50 community members from seven CALD backgrounds, including asylum seekers, permanent residents and Australia citizens, to better understand the immediate issues or information gaps that exist for CALD communities as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

In addition to the recommendations put forward in AMES October 2019 submission to the Inquiry, we make the following recommendations to the Legal and Social Issues Committee, for consideration and implementation by the Victorian Government.

- 1. Distribute practical, multilingual information about early childhood services in a variety of accessible mediums that can be distributed both online and through community networks such as schools, kindergartens and early childhood settings.*
- 2. Invest in digital literacy and remote learning training for parents accessing early childhood services, with language assistance as required, to ensure that parents are better equipped to support their children in a remote learning environment.*
- 3. Support access to learning for CALD adults and their children by introducing free childcare in the short to medium term in all Victorian government funded education and training programs tailored to newly arrived CALD communities.*

We expand on these recommendations in the remainder of this document. We welcome the opportunity to assist the Committee further in its Inquiry.

Sources of information

CALD communities are obtaining information about the coronavirus pandemic through a variety of formal and informal sources. Formal sources include traditional media, such as TV, radio and in-language news programs, as well as online and sources such as news websites, YouTube, Facebook and the COVID-safe app. This also includes official government sources, such as state and federal department websites, and briefs from the Chief Medical Officer. Informal sources include family, friends and community members both in Australia and overseas. Schools may also be being relied on to provide information through children who are receiving resources via their school or parent requests for information being made directly to schools.

AMES understands that there has been significant confusion within CALD communities due to language barriers and/or inconsistent information being shared through word-of-mouth and online. 'Information overload' has meant some people have struggled to keep up with the changing nature of the restrictions, such as the early shopping hours introduced for elderly or vulnerable people, and when children in certain grades can return to school. There is a need for community-orientated information regarding the coronavirus pandemic that accounts for variances in language ability and/or digital literacy. For example, for the many CALD community members who do not have access to internet or do not know how to use social media, they do not have access to in-language videos that are being produced about the coronavirus. Translated material also doesn't account for people who may not be literate in their first language, so translated text should be supplemented with visual images. There are also a number of topic areas that more practical and reliable information is being sought including access to government services, new laws and penalties, and stress prevention, especially for refugees who may be vulnerable in circumstances of extreme stress.

Recommendation 1: Distribute **practical, multilingual** information about early childhood services in a **variety of accessible mediums** that can be distributed both online and through community networks such as schools, kindergartens and early childhood settings.

Challenges with remote learning

There may be a number of emerging (or notably increased) challenges for CALD communities due to the coronavirus pandemic. Parenting and supporting children with their education in a remote learning environment is one of these. Access to the relevant devices to engage with online learning platforms and access to the internet has highlighted the 'digital divide' that exists within CALD communities. In big families, children may need to share devices or be competing with siblings to hotspot off one phone at a time, and it can be hard for some children to find a quiet place to learn within their home environment. Families living in public housing can have multiple children in different grade levels learning in the same room. The Victorian Government promised to "provide a device to every child that needs one"¹; in reality the roll out of this initiative took seven weeks, at which time the younger grades had already returned to school. Furthermore, if parents have limited English it can be difficult to assist children to understand their schoolwork. Some parents are not sure how to access language assistance, or that it is even available, and therefore any resources provided to parents should include contact details for free translation services.

It has also been hard for some parents to keep children entertained within the home as they become bored and restless. This may lead to relationship breakdowns or intergenerational conflict, where a parent may turn to the school or early learning centre for help. There is no doubt that some families

¹ <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/victorian-students-to-learn-from-home-as-vce-timelines-revised/>

may have had positive learning experiences through the remote learning trial, as it has also been a learning experience for schools and teachers, however for many children from a CALD background, engagement and participation in their schooling may have been negatively affected.

Recommendation 2: Invest in **digital literacy and remote learning training** for parents accessing early childhood services, with language assistance as required, to ensure that parents are better equipped to support their children in a remote learning environment.

Access to free child care

Free child care services within the federally funded Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), which entitles learners to 510 hours of English tuition, is known to provide significant benefit to newly arrived migrants and refugees who are focussed on learning English and settling in Australia. Without this service, it is likely that many adult learners with child care responsibilities would be unable to effectively learn English, gain information to assist in initial orientation, meet other people, build their social networks and develop a sense of belonging – all opportunities to enhance overall settlement. Provision of child care also benefits the children who are exposed to opportunities for early learning, preparation for schooling in Australia, and in most cases the opportunity to spend time in an English speaking environment. AMES October 2019 submission to this Inquiry recommended that free child care be extended to other government-funded education and training programs tailored to newly arrived CALD communities. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the importance and urgency of such reforms.

Child care can be expensive for newly arrived migrants and refugees. Many of these families also have no access to family support as an alternative option. The high cost of child care may therefore significantly impact CALD communities' engagement in education and training and workforce participation, disproportionately affecting CALD women who are more likely to be the primary carer of children in Australia.² The Federal Government's Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package introduced in April 2020 underpinned thousands of child care worker jobs and the viability of many centres during the coronavirus pandemic.³ It has also ensured essential workers had access to child care services to continue working, and those who lost their jobs were not paying child care fees that they could no longer afford or needed. Recently, the government indicated they are considering a return to a co-payment funding model. There is a significant risk that many families will no longer be in a position to afford the co-contribution. Under the childcare subsidy model, even if child care services are no longer required, parents still have to be charged. This is an opportunity for the Victorian Government to fill a looming economic gap and introduce free child care in all Victorian government funded education and training programs in the short to medium term, particularly those tailored to newly arrived CALD communities. As an example, the AMEP model (510 hours of delivery) offers free child care. This model could be replicated in Victoria for the number of subsidised hours a newly arrived CALD learner is entitled to within a given course or training program. This would support learner engagement and retention.

Recommendation 3: Support access to learning for CALD adults and their children by introducing **free childcare** in the short to medium term in **all Victorian government funded education and training programs** tailored to newly arrived CALD communities.

² ABS Census data 2016

³ Federal Department of Education – Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package Four Week Review. Summary Report 18 May 2020.
https://www.dese.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/ecec_relief_package_four_week_review_summary_report_0.pdf