



**ethnic
communities'
council of
victoria**

7 March 2008

**ECCV SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA'S
EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE**

*Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian
Students Participate in Higher Education*

1. The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Education and Training Committee's Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education. ECCV firmly believes that the provision of equal access to education is a vital condition of equitable participation in our society. It is important that the Victorian Government address issues for students to participate in Victoria's education and training systems by overcoming barriers for some of Victoria's most disadvantaged families and communities.
2. Established in 1974 as a voluntary community based organisation, ECCV is now a broadly based, state-wide, peak advocacy body representing ethnic and multicultural communities across Victoria. For over 30 years, ECCV has remained the principal liaison point between ethnic communities, government and the wider community in Victoria. ECCV has been a key player in building Victoria as a successful, harmonious and multicultural society today.
3. While geographic differences is a significant barrier to participation in higher education, ECCV would like to draw the Committee's attention to the need for greater research in the social, cultural and linguistic barriers to higher education.
4. ECCV believes that differences in cultural barriers may provide a greater barrier for some of Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, especially those coming from refugee backgrounds. ECCV's submission focuses on identifying to the Committee strategies to address these barriers and increase participation rates to ensure that all Victorians receive equal opportunities to study in Victoria's higher education institutions.
5. There is a need for targeted research of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data which identifies the participation rates of CALD communities in higher education so as to identify groups that may be missing out from the benefits of higher education. Such data is difficult to access and the Victorian Government should invest resources to enable a clear picture of CALD communities' participation in higher education. While some communities appear to have high participation rates, there is concern that some new and emerging communities may be under represented in our higher education system. Data is needed to determine whether these concerns are accurate.

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6. ECCV is concerned that participation in higher education of some people from refugee backgrounds may also relate to the lack of appropriate and systemic educational support for such groups in Victoria's secondary schools. As all migrants have different experiences, refugee groups are more disadvantaged due to their exposure to cultural shocks, traumatic experiences and difficulties in the areas of English language, their financial situation, housing and employment. They may have experienced inadequate education back in their former countries, the institution may have been located in the context of refugee camps where experiences of displacement, a lack of resources and stress would have impacted significantly on their learning process.
7. The education system within Victoria was not developed to meet the needs of students with vastly different educational experiences to the mainstream. As a result, it is often difficult for students from refugee backgrounds to navigate the education system and retention within schools is a growing area of concern. The Victorian education policy of classifying students according to their age rather than ability has caused some young people to leave school and education early, which then affects participation in higher education. ECCV believes that a major inquiry and public policy initiatives are required around this issue alone.
8. People of CALD and refugee backgrounds from regional areas are often disadvantaged in terms of accessing higher education. As higher education courses are limited in a number of regional cities, students often have to travel long distances or move out of home to attend classes. Due to new waves of migration, regional communities are changing and more government and policy attention is needed to ensure that they are not denied access to higher education.
9. Access to appropriate transport is a significant issue for many low-income and disadvantaged communities, as well as for those living in suburban areas. Access to regular and reliable public transportation is also an ongoing issue in many regional communities and CALD communities can be particularly disadvantaged in terms of access. Not having appropriate access to transport influences the capacity for students to travel and participate in higher education.
10. The unavailability of housing also places restrictions on many students to accessing a diverse range of education opportunities due to the inability to relocate into accessible housing. For Monash University students, Clayton and its surrounding suburbs are experiencing the lowest rental vacancy rates in 40 years and rent for houses and flats has increased by 20 per cent. The lack of available and suitable housing has made it difficult for students, especially those on low-incomes, as there are increasing numbers every year applying for a limited amount of housing near higher education institutions.
11. Many young people, especially those from refugee backgrounds, lose opportunities to enter higher education due to their employment and family commitments. ECCV is especially concerned about single mothers as a number of them want to gain skills and qualifications but face barriers in doing so.
12. Regular monitoring of student progress with particular emphasis on the performance of disadvantaged groups is crucial to ensuring equal opportunity in our higher education system. ECCV recommends that higher education institutions should extend cultural awareness training for staff in higher education institutions. This would ensure that teaching models and practices are sensitive and responsive to higher levels of cultural diversity in our community.



13. In conclusion, ECCV argues that while geographical differences provide barriers to higher education, there are other barriers around culture, housing, transport and employment that may affect participation. Major work needs to be done to support programs for people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to better access our higher education institutions.