

Kongor Students Association of Australia (KSAA): Submission to the Australian Human Right Commission (African Australian Human Rights and Social Inclusion Issues)

1. Kongor Students Association (KSA) was formed in 1998 in Kakuma Refugee (Kenya) to help young people from the Kongor community improve on academic performance. From about 2000 many KSA members got resettled in the United States of America, Canada, and Australia. KSA members in Australia continued with KSA work. In 2003 at the KSAA Adelaide I conference the members decided to reform the KSA and renamed it Kongor Students Association of Australia (KSAA). KSAA aims at promoting

- a. education,
- b. settlement and integration in Australia and
- c. development in Africa.

2. KSAA recognises that its members are proud Sudanese young people who are actively involved in the process of settlement and integration into the Australian society by:

- a. Acknowledging the African and Sudanese cultural heritage
- b. Promoting development in Africa through coming up with projects that mainly support education and young people
- c. Encouraging members to take up education in Australia as the way forward
- d. Provide a platform where the members and the community come together and sort out issues such as intergenerational issues
- e. Work with settlement service providers and NGOs to help settling young people in Australia
- f. Help members with family reunification by providing loans to pay for airfare

3. KSAA has contributed and is still contributing to the wider Australian community through its members by:

- a. Building leadership skills
- b. Organisational skills such as organising conferences
- c. Networking and working with settlement service providers and NGOs

- d. Organising activities meant to keep young people occupied and stop them from getting on the street
- e. Helping members with their school work through free tutorials
- f. Providing a forum that brings together the members and elders creating a space where intergenerational issues can be discussed

4. Education

KSAA's main concern is the promotion of education among its members. The following issues are identified by the KSAA:

4.1 Sudanese Kids in schools being made to attend classes on the basis of their age not on the basis of their ability.

Due to displacement and the disruption caused by the war, many Sudanese young people missed out on school. It is common to find a 13 year old with year 2 education made to attend year 9. This makes it difficult for the young people to catch up and as a result drop out of school eventually.

KSAA recognise that it is not possible to have a 15 year old placed in a class made up of 5 years olds. Dickson College in Canberra has come up with a program that helps young people who have missed out on a lot of their education so that they are given as much support as possible to give them the skills that they need to be able to handle school work at the level appropriate to their age. Other states in Australia are doing similar programs.

Recommendations

- a. Programs like those run by Dickson College need to actively engage the African communities from designing them to delivering them
- b. African teachers and African teacher aide need to be part of the teaching staff.
- c. Counselling needs to be part of such programs as young people who have just arrived in Australia deal with trauma and other issues they bring with them.
- d. State governments provide continuous funding to such programs as above

- e. Schools where African young people go to need to have special programs that help high school African students gain skills that they need to enable them do school work
- f. A home tutoring program be set up to help African young people with studying at home

4.2 Sudanese children at school suffer bullying.

KSAA understand that Sudanese children suffer bullying at school. This happens frequently. For example, all 15 Sudanese children who meet on a regular basis in the weekends to do activities aimed at improving their English in Canberra said they suffered bullying within the first few months of their schooling. Some of these children changed schools a couple of times without the knowledge of their parents.

Account

I am in year five and I changed schools three times last year. Kids called me names and when I bring food from home they laughed at me because the food looked weird to them. One boy in class threw a book at me and when I complained the teacher did nothing. So I hit the boy because I was angry. I was taken before the teacher and got punished.

Recommendations

- a. Children at school need to be taught what bullying is and that all forms of bullying are wrong
- b. Teachers need to make an effort to understand African children when these children make complaint
- c. Cultural awareness programs need to be run in schools attended by Sudanese/African children
- d. African parents need to be engaged by the schools more actively and regular meetings held with parents more often to explore the progress of children. There may be need for interpreters during such meetings

4.3 At higher level of education access is made difficult by the failure of the system in Australia to recognise prior learning or qualifications.

Account

I have come to Australia with a secondary school certificate from Kenya. It would be the equivalent of a college certificate in Australia. The language of communication in Kenyan schools is English. I was asked to do 510 hours of Adult Migrant English Program. I couldn't believe this. I told them I have had years of English learning and my English is not bad. I showed them my papers. They insisted I do the English program because my prior learning won't be recognised!

Access to universities and some TAFE courses is made difficult or impossible by the system. The reason given in most cases is that prior learning is not recognised. This hurdle is not necessary.

Recommendations

- a. Prior learning is as good and need to be considered when African students apply for places in TAFE and universities
- b. Should there be a doubt about prior learning, applicants should be made to prepare for a test. Applicants should be instructed on the areas to be tested and given a week to study before the test.
- c. If prior learning is not recognised and the test can't be given, applicants should be given preparatory courses as a pathway leading to proper university or TAFE courses/training.

4.4 Accessing scholarships at universities

Many KSAA members can't afford to buy books as they are expensive. Many of the KSAA members who study at the university levels have other responsibilities such as families they support in Africa. Even if these students get part time jobs, there isn't enough money to buy books.

Scholarships at university are a good way to help such students. However, many Sudanese students miss out.

Accounts

- i) I applied for three scholarships at uni last year. I couldn't get one. This year I applied again and didn't get any scholarship. I complained but nothing was done. When I met the Dean of students in the capacity of a student representative I discovered that uni had some more money for scholarship that uni intends to keep for the next academic year. It is then I organised to meet the Dean of students to make my case. I was offered a scholarship. Now I can buy all the books uni requires.
- ii) I was surprised when I learnt from the Vice Chancellor that Sudanese students are considered international students. It is a surprise because when we apply we show them our visas and they photocopy them for documentation. As a result we can't get scholarship or any special attention.

Recommendations

- a. African students are some of the under privileged students especially if they came to Australia as refugees and as a result need to be given special consideration as far as scholarships are concerned
- b. Universities need to look closer at the status of students when they decide who should be given the scholarships to not disadvantage the deserving

5. Employment

KSAA recognises the importance of employment. Many KSAA members study as well as work or would like to work to earn extra money to help mainly family in Africa.

5.1 Access problems

Getting a job is a very empowering thing as it provides people with an opportunity to contribute to society. It also provides the opportunity for meeting other people and extending ones network. The financial reward is very important too. Africans and probably other minority groups find it harder to access jobs.

Account

I just deferred my studies for a semester to find a job. I applied for ten jobs last month and I got invited for 10 interviews. I didn't get any of the ten jobs. I got invited to interviews because my name on paper is 'Mark J. Michael', very Anglo-Saxon name. However, when I turn up for an interview, they were shocked and I never heard from them again!

There is clearly some element of discrimination when Africans who live in Australia apply for a job.

Recommendation

- a. It is important that employers give an equal opportunity in accessing job
- b. Governments need to ensure that there is a balanced racial representation at the work place such that when an African apply or a non Anglo-Saxon apply for a job they are given more consideration
- c. Small businesses need to be encouraged (given incentives) to employ Africans by governments emphasising the values that Africans bring to the work place such as hard work, obedience, honesty, etc

5.2 Recognition of work experience gained prior to arriving in Australia

Work experience acquired by many KSAA members prior to coming to Australia is not recognised. This creates a situation where people are forced to retrain or take other jobs that are not suitable for them.

Recommendations

- a. A prior work experience evaluation body be established that determines whether ones prior work experiences are recognised in Australian
- b. Flexible experience validation training can be organised. This could be done through a work placement for a few months.

5.3 Lack of cultural awareness at the work place

Lack of understanding Sudanese cultures is a huge problem at the work place. Due to lack of cultural awareness many Sudanese people lose their jobs.

Account

I got a job as a cleaner. I went to work and did what is required of me. However, few weeks later I was told that I didn't fit at the work place. I didn't understand what that meant. I was told that I didn't smile at people or talked to them! I lost my job.

In many Sudanese cultures one didn't smile for no reason and one maintained seriousness especially when it is too busy. You didn't go to work to talk but if the opportunity presented itself you did have a chat. It is not considered a problem if one didn't smile or talk as long as the job is done.

Recommendations

- a. Appropriate cultural training is important and should be done on regular basis at the work place to sensitise workers and employers

- b. In work places where there are African employees, African cultural training be given by Africans themselves
- c. Special training be given to supervisors and managers who deal with African employees to give them a better understanding of the African culture.

5.4 Sudanese don't know their rights at the work place

KSAA realises that the reasons that many Sudanese people lose jobs or get treated with disrespect at the work place are related to lack of knowing what to do when Sudanese workers are being confronted with situations such as someone harassing them at work. Without knowing the system and knowing ones right it is difficult to stand up for oneself.

Recommendations

- a. Sudanese/African communities be taught how the work place works and what they should do at work if they are confronted with a situation such as racism through community information sessions
- b. Teaching Sudanese/Africans about their rights at the work place

6. Housing

The first most pressing issue that anyone faces when they come to Australia is where to live. Homelessness is a big problem and it frustrates Sudanese refugees because it is about finding a place one would come back to as a home. It is a right and people who come to Australia are entitled to it.

6.1 Access to housing

Access to housing is the one major factor that that faces newly arrived people. Private rental is impossible to obtain as this requires people to have rental history in Australia. Lack of

employment complicates the situation. Community housing is characterised with long waiting lists (could be years of waiting).

Recommendations

- a. Community housing should give priority to humanitarian entrants especially Africans
- b. Settlement service providers and NGOs need to be providing references and give real estate agencies guarantee that rent will be paid on time

6.1 Exploitation by real estate agencies

KSAA observes that there is a lot of exploitation in the private rental market. This is done in the form of increasing rent without the knowledge of the tenants or asking the tenants to move out without prior warning.

Recommendations

- a. Providing information about how the rental market work to Sudanese/African communities
- b. Teaching Sudanese/Africans what their tenancy rights and obligations are

6.2 The size of Sudanese families

Sudanese families are quite big as compared to average Australian families. The Sudanese family and indeed the African family often include members of the extended family.

Account

We are a family of eight and finding a house for all of us was not possible. So we had to split up the family so that we find somewhere to live. Now we live in two houses.

Recommendations

- a. Big families need to be settled in places where it is possible to access bigger houses
- b. Urban planning should take into account provision of bigger housing for large families especially in areas where there is a large concentration of Sudanese/African population

6.3 Affordability of private rental

Increase in rental prices especially in the major cities where most of the Sudanese/African population lives compounds the housing problem. Since access to employment is problematic, many Sudanese families live on social security. This can't pay for all the family expenses.

Recommendation

- a. Sudanese/African families be encouraged to move to country towns where there is more, large and cheaper housing

7. Health

Good health is vital for the wellbeing of the African community in Australia. This includes physical, spiritual and mental wellbeing.

7.1 Accessing health services

Many Sudanese/Africans appreciate the health care system that is in Australia and often find access to some health services easy. For example all Sudanese families in Canberra have access to GPs. Accessing specialised services is more difficult.

The problem with GPs is sometimes that there is lack of interpreters or interpreting is done inappropriately. For example it is inappropriate for a Sudanese male especially if they are younger to interpret for a woman. Sometime the wrong interpreter is asked to do interpreting.

There are always long waiting periods for specialists. This could be months or even years.

Account

My daughter has been waiting for a specialised operation in her nostrils for the last two years. Every time I ask they tell me the waiting list is still long!

Recommendation

- a. GPs need to be aware of the cultural needs of the patients so that they can provide health services in an appropriate manner
- b. The right interpreters need to be found and the patient need to be allowed to say if they are comfortable with interpreter
- c. The length of time for waiting for a specialised service need to be reduced dramatically

7.2 Mental health

Towards the end of last year, a KSAA member committed suicide. This was a shock to many people but to those who were close to the deceased it was not a surprise. Many of those who were not surprised noticed that the suicide was a result of unaddressed mental health issues.

In Canberra three young girls have threatened to commit suicide. These girls have been seeing counsellors but they are not getting any better.

There is a stigma about mental health in the Sudanese community and it is not discussed. It is believed in the Sudanese community that counselling doesn't work.

Recommendations

- a. Educate the Sudanese community about mental health issues and the signs of mental health problems
- b. Provide a forum where members of the Sudanese community can come out and discuss mental health issues
- c. The role of counselling in helping in improving mental health need to emphasised
- d. Sudanese traditional understanding of mental health and traditional methods of counselling need to be incorporated in mental health therapy for Sudanese.

8. Conclusion

KSAA's main concern is education. However, settlement and integration issues, housing, employment and mental health are very relevant to the KSAA. The overarching recommendation that the KSAA makes is in two fold:

- a. Sudanese/African cultural understanding by the Australia society is important and must be encouraged/promoted and resources committed to it
- b. Sudanese/Africans must be actively and directly involved in addressing issues of concern to them