



## **Submission to the African Australians: Human Rights and Social Inclusion Issues Report**

by

Students of the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL)  
Program Inc  
Melbourne and Sydney campuses

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For more information about the SAIL Program, visit [www.sailprogram.org.au](http://www.sailprogram.org.au)

## Introduction

SAIL is a volunteer, non-profit, secular organisation that provides free English support and community to the Sudanese refugee community in Melbourne and Sydney.

SAIL was established in Melbourne in 2001, and has expanded rapidly over the past eight years. SAIL currently has six campuses operating in Melbourne and one campus in Sydney (with a second to be opened on August 1 2009), offering tutoring to approximately 500 members of the Sudanese community. It is operated by a volunteer staff of about 400 people, including over 370 tutors. Most activities operated by the SAIL Program run every Saturday morning. These activities are:

- **SAIL** - free English as a Second Language tutoring for Sudanese children and teenagers.
- **SAIL Senior**- a similar program run for the Sudanese adults. The aim of SAIL Senior is to provide the adults with contacts to improve their English language skills and to enable them to consolidate their children's learning at home.
- **SAIL Junior**- provides under 6 year olds with the opportunity to learn socialisation skills in an English speaking environment. SAIL Junior also provides the SAIL Senior participants with some quiet time to concentrate on learning English.
- **SAIL Xtend**- extra-curricular short courses for school-aged SAIL participants.
- **Home Help** engages experienced female SAIL volunteers to offer weekday home visits to Sudanese mothers for 3 hours.
- **SAIL About** offers free camps and excursions to members of the Sudanese community. Camps occur three or more times each year to various parts of rural and regional Australia.
- Every Saturday all SAIL participants are provided with a free, fresh and healthy lunch and a pick-up and drop-off service.
- **Community and Tutor Talks**- A range of professionals speak to tutors offering skill renewal opportunities. The Sudanese community are offered talks about issues pertinent to them; including housing, health, migration, tracing lost family members and job-hunting.

This submission is based on discussions with Senior (adult) students at SAIL. Forums were held at both the Melbourne and Sydney campuses in June 2009. About twenty senior SAILors participated in the discussions from the combined Melbourne campuses; twelve participated in Sydney. The groups included both female and male students from the SAIL community. The discussions were facilitated by SAIL volunteer tutors who have experience in running group discussions, and were recorded through note-taking by separate note-takers also drawn from the volunteer tutor group.

We hope that this submission provides a useful contribution to the African Australians project.

### **SAIL Melbourne campuses**

#### **Health**

SAIL students have had varied experiences of Australia's health care system. Those who came to Australia through the UN were assigned a social worker for 6 months. Their social worker provided them with information regarding health and the healthcare system, which has proved very helpful. Those who did not have access to a social worker struggled to understand where and how to find appropriate treatment. SAIL students generally have difficulty communicating with doctors and hospital staff, and have been very grateful when they have been provided with translators on request. When they do not have a translator, SAIL students have difficulty comprehending information given by medical professionals.

Most SAIL students were healthy on arrival in Australia. Others needed medical care due to travel, for example, through Egypt. Adjusting to Australia's weather and food also occasionally required medical attention. SAIL students have waited very long periods for doctors, usually between 2-5 hours. This can be very distressing. In addition, health procedures in Australia are often different to the ways in which African doctors treat their patients. SAIL students have, at times, felt uncomfortable and as though they were a drain on their doctor's time. Some SAIL students also have issues related specifically to their Sudanese origin eg. cleanliness/hygiene

Mental health is another area of concern for SAIL students. This is largely due to the separation of families and culture, resulting in homesickness and depression. Some students families are still in Sudan/Egypt and they can not afford to bring them to Australia. If SAIL students go to Sudan to visit their family, their Centrelink payments will be cut. Mental health issues are also compounded by having many family members living together in confined areas.

On a positive note SAIL students are, on the whole, happy with the healthcare system in Australia. SAIL students feel that medical professionals are friendly, and they are treated with respect within the healthcare system. One SAILor's son is even receiving appropriate speech therapy for his stutter.

#### **Housing**

Housing is one of the biggest issues for SAIL students and a major cause of stress. Some SAIL students have been waiting up to 6 years for housing commission accommodation. One SAILor applied for public housing twice, but her applications have been rejected.

Rental accommodation can be humiliating as it involves constant rejection. SAIL students feel that their acceptance as a refugee involves the promise of adequate housing. When this is not delivered, SAIL students sometimes feel that they would prefer to return to Sudan if there is no place for them to stay in Australia.

Those with public housing accommodation often live in overcrowded conditions eg. 3 bedrooms for 6 people. One SAILor feels that their neighbourhood is unsafe and wants to move.

Often SAIL students attend house interviews but are rejected. There is a huge amount of stress involved with waiting for public housing, applying for private rental accommodation and constantly having to move with large families. The constant rejection, coupled with trying to work can cause family difficulties and marriage breakdowns. If a family does manage to find private rental accommodation, the rent is often very expensive, especially if one or two of the parents do not work. One family lived for 2 years in a 2 bedroom house with 3 children. The father had to sleep in the living room. Another family pays \$600 rent per fortnight for 5 people in a very old house i.e. \$125 each. Centrelink does not provide enough assistance to cover this cost. Other SAIL students have had to sleep in their cars while searching for accommodation.

Culturally, Sudanese cannot refuse to look after someone they know who is on the street and needs somewhere to live. Therefore there are often many people living in the one house, making the conditions even more cramped. One SAILor lived in emergency housing for 2.5 years which involved 11 people living in just 4 rooms. One result of having so many people in a small space is that houses can get damaged, making it more difficult for families to find further rental accommodation. SAIL students also tend to live in very old houses. In the past when things have broken, SAIL students have called to get them fixed but no one has come. The problem has then escalated, impacting on the family's ability to rent another house.

Private accommodation also carries with it a certain amount of uncertainty. Some SAIL students have lived in houses and the landlord has called the police, kicking the family out with no explanation. While looking for another place to live, families often have to live in just one hotel room. Even when the family is notified about having to leave their current accommodation, 60 days warning is often not enough time to find a new place before the police arrive.

Those SAIL students who have had assistance from social workers do not feel that the housing system was explained to them properly. Their rental applications are generally rejected. Some SAIL students were told that their applications had been moved to a different suburb, leading to a wild goose chase that ultimately ends with the family having to fill out another application. One SAILor's GP wrote a letter of recommendation which assisted her family in finding a house. She feels, however that this information should be explained to new arrivals more clearly. Ultimately, SAIL students would like more assistance in navigating bureaucracy and finding appropriate accommodation. They also feel that it would be worthwhile to have a

strong African Community able to advocate on behalf of the Sudanese in relation to areas such as housing.

### **Justice and Legal Systems**

SAIL students have a generally positive view of law enforcement. They have an understanding that if they call, the police will come. The problem is then being able to communicate information to the police. One SAILor's first experience of law enforcement was when his house was broken into. The police came straight away which reassured his family. Similarly, in the communities where police are visible, crime is not as much of an issue as in other areas.

SAIL students agree that it is important to uphold the law and if someone does something wrong they should go to court. The main issue though is that new arrivals are generally unaware of their legal rights and responsibilities. SAIL students feel that new arrivals require more education about the law and how it affects the Sudanese community. They also feel that greater awareness of community legal services such as Legal Aid would be worthwhile. The best way to disseminate this information would be through education services, DVDs, community talks and written information that puts people in touch with appropriate services.

SAIL students also feel there needs to be greater integration of African/Sudanese people into the legal/law enforcement systems. Many candidates are refused help based on their English ability. SAIL students believe that the Sudanese community or those migrants/refugees who have been in Australia for long periods should help advocate in relation to legal issues, and have a greater consultative role with the police force. Ultimately they could also represent Sudanese interests at the government level.

Some SAIL students have experienced gang bashings from other African groups (males from a diverse range of countries). Mothers are particularly concerned about their own children becoming involved in crime. They feel that the freedom of coming to Australia and the number of different influences can cause some children to lose their way. They feel that youth often have issues when they first arrive in Australia, particularly as they do not know the law. Mothers feel that if their oldest child stays out of trouble, the other children will follow. SAIL students feel that sport could play a role in keeping the youth from joining gangs. They feel that sport is very important in helping children grow up, and having an international club could reduce violence.

### **Employment**

SAIL students' lack of English greatly affects their ability to gain employment. Most SAIL students do not feel they have been discriminated against in employment and training and believe their level of English as the main reason for their difficulties finding work. Some have managed to make it to the interview stage of the job

application process but have missed out due to their lack of English. Some SAIL students have undertaken study such as Certificates in Food Handling and Cleaning Certificates at TAFE; however they are still concerned that their lack of language skills will ultimately hinder their ability to find work. SAIL students are saddened and frustrated at the lack of opportunity to work. They would prefer there to be a lesser emphasis on language, as there are still jobs that they can do without fluent English skills. SAIL students are working hard to improve their English so that they will have more job opportunities.

Another factor inhibiting SAIL students from successfully finding employment is their lack of experience. Centrelink encourages SAIL students to find work, however lack of experience is a real hindrance. It can be stressful and isolating to continually have job applications rejected, particularly as Centrelink payments are not adequate for whole families to live on. Some SAIL students have documents to prove their qualifications or prior experience, but due to civil war in Sudan, some documents have been destroyed. Culturally, proof of experience is not as important in Sudan as in Australia. People find work and gain experience without supporting documents in Africa. This can be a difficult cultural shift for job seekers. Some SAIL students who do have previous qualifications do still need retraining in Australia (for example, engineers). Once they are provided with employment opportunities, SAIL students work hard to prove themselves. One SAILor works 7 nights a week cleaning for Connex (9pm – 5am), and feels validated through being able to work hard and contribute to society.

Other issues with finding employment involve not being able to move where work is available due to the difficulty of relocating their families, as well as difficulties surrounding public transport. Most jobs require a car, and childcare is rarely accessible. Jobs that begin before 5am can be particularly difficult to access, as there is no public transport at this time.

SAIL students have had mixed results at Job Networks. While some successfully found work at factories or cleaning, the majority did not. One SAILor was told that there was no work for them and that they should return when their child turned 7 years old. SAIL students make appointments at the Job Network since it is a requirement of receiving Centrelink payments, but few believe that the Job Network will be able to help. Finding work appears to be more successful through word of mouth (within the Sudanese community) rather than through advertising or the Job Network.

SAIL students' believe that work is important. Unemployment negatively affects new arrivals' sense of identity. Parents fear growing old and not being able to support their children.

SAIL students feel that some employers have a problem giving jobs to African people. Employers have lied about job availability and given jobs to non-Africans. SAIL students feel that discrimination is the fault of employers, not the Australian

Government. On a more positive note, parents feel that the younger generation have an easier time finding work, and do not seem to face all of the same issues.

## **Education**

SAIL students' first experiences of education were learning where to access English Language Services from family members and sponsors. SAIL students understand the importance of language skills in both living and working in Australia, and have undertaken to improve their English as best they can. New arrivals often find the Australian accent difficult, but have been happy with the opportunities for English assistance and computer literacy that have been offered to them. There is a feeling that education is of a very high standard in Australia and that the school system encourages participation.

Parents encourage their children to study hard and their children generally enjoy school. Parents are concerned about their children's performance in the school system. They worry that their children are behind at school, especially in reading. There is concern that their children do not have enough homework or extra support when they are struggling. Parents feel that their children move up the levels at school without appropriate checks that they are ready and able to cope with the next grade. Some SAIL students have found that the local Catholic school is better than their local state school. Children appear to learn more and are kept busy. Remedial teaching is also given when needed. Parents do, however, feel that the level of communication between the school and themselves is good.

## **Sydney campus**

### **General Settlement issues**

A recurring theme in discussions was SAIL students' experiences upon first arriving in Australia. SAIL students acknowledged that Immigration Officers were friendly and helpful, but that there were several practical issues related to successfully settling in Australia of which they felt uninformed. SAIL students received assistance and advice in these areas by members of the community, or organisations such as charities and Migrant Resource Centres. These organisations provide crucial support to newly arrived migrant communities as people negotiate a range of new systems and services.

The separation of families is a significant issue for many SAIL students. Several people expressed concern about the fate of families abroad. The application process for bringing family to Australia can be complex and expensive. In order to sponsor family members a person must have, among other things, a job and personal savings. This can be a great challenge for members of refugee communities who can struggle to find meaningful employment with limited English skills.

For many Sudanese women, childcare is a major barrier to accessing education and employment. SAIL students spoke of difficulties particularly with the cost of childcare, and of finding places in childcare facilities for their children. Centrelink does assist with childcare, but this is only affordable when children are over one year old. One SAILor had to wait one year to get her child a place in childcare, which meant she was unable to attend the free AMEP English classes. Other SAIL students appreciated that TAFE provided them with childcare while they were studying. Without cheap and easily accessible childcare options, these women cannot consider looking for work.

When dealing with government agencies such as Centrelink, there can be difficulties for young people to take time off school to attend appointments. Youths from refugee backgrounds may be placed in grades below their age range because of their literacy levels, which means that some must still attend school at age 18. There was a suggestion that in these cases, parents should be able to liaise with agencies on behalf of their children.

In order to obtain a licence in NSW, a person must first complete 120 hours of driving practice. Those who do not have a community support network with licensed drivers that are able to teach them must pay for driving instruction. This amounts to a huge cost for newly arrived migrants. It was suggested that free driving lessons could be offered to members of refugee communities in very low income brackets.

Racism in the media is also an issue of concern among SAIL students. Some believe that the media tends to focus on any acts of violence committed by African Australians, but does not consider the reasons behind the violence. SAIL students hoped that there could be more positive media stories about African Australian communities.

### **Education**

SAIL students were generally happy with the standard of education in Australia. Some public schools in the area provide ESL teachers; others have an intensive English Centre within the school. Some private Catholic schools have special after hours programs to help children with their schoolwork. There have been mixed experiences with school teachers. Some teachers have been very understanding and helpful towards Sudanese students; others appear not to want to teach them, or treat them differently to the rest of the class. It was suggested that teachers could be taught more about African cultures and the history and politics behind some conflicts, so that they could better understand refugees' worldview.

Bullying in schools is a major concern among SAIL students. This includes social isolation and name calling, as well as physical attacks. One participant's daughter had her hair pulled as other children tried to take her "mask" off. This issue is believed to be worse in public schools than private schools. Some SAIL students specifically chose schools for their children where there were greater numbers of Sudanese children because they believed racism and bullying would be less prevalent there.

SAIL students believe bullying is poorly addressed by the community. There are no racism contact officers or anti-bullying programs in some schools. People are generally reluctant to report bullying for fear of further reprisals, but on those occasions it has been reported, children have been told they need to deal with it themselves. Students have found that if they challenge racist behaviour then the perpetrator usually becomes more aggressive, whereas if they remain passive the abuse lessens. Partly because of these negative experiences, some students maintain friendship groups with people who are only from African backgrounds. Some young SAIL students prefer to work with other migrant students on class assignments rather than Anglo-Australians, because it is less likely they will be discriminated against by these students. Bullying and racist behaviour contribute to low self esteem among the Sudanese community. SAIL students think there should be greater education in the community to stop this discrimination. In some high schools there are programs that teach children about African customs, which helps to create better understanding between cultures.

Most adult SAIL students had completed all 500 hours of English lessons provided under the AMES program. However this number of hours is not always adequate to become fluent in English. SAIL students felt they needed more time to be able to learn English properly. They have sought out free programs such as SAIL to continue

their English language training. Better access to libraries could also assist both adults and young people who are studying.

University degrees gained while in Sudan are not generally recognised in Australia. This means that in addition to learning a new language, Sudanese must often find employment skills courses to gain recognised qualifications. These courses are more difficult for those without any computer skills. It was suggested that some basic computer training should be a part of every TAFE course that requires computer work. It was also suggested that there should be some shorter (6 months to one year) TAFE courses that can lead to meaningful employment.

## **Employment**

A major obstacle to finding a job is a lack of English proficiency. This makes it difficult to understand employment advertisements, and to know where to find recruitment services. Some SAIL students received assistance from their local Migrant Resource Centre in searching through newspapers for suitable employment. Migrant Resource Centres have also helped people to find TAFE courses.

Once SAIL students have completed these TAFE courses and have started looking for work, they have been told that they must have work experience to be considered for employment. One SAILor completed a TAFE course in cleaning, but cannot find a job because of her lack of experience. An additional barrier to obtaining work is the requirement to have a drivers licence. As discussed earlier, unless a person has family or community support to teach them to drive, it is very difficult to afford 120 hours of driving lessons without having some paying work.

The lack of ability for some women to find employment can put an additional strain on their families. Husbands may be forced to work unhealthy hours to provide for their families (in the absence of a dual family income). This includes not only immediate family, but also providing for extended family in Sudan. One SAILor's husband works from 9-5pm every day as a Welfare Officer, and then from 6pm-1am as a Security Guard to support their family. If there were more opportunities and services to assist women obtaining employment, then the heavy financial pressures faced by refugee families may be reduced.

## **Health**

The general opinion among SAIL students is that health care services in Australia are good. Some SAIL students were not always aware of the health services that were available to them on arrival to Australia (such as Medicare), or the costs involved with certain health services. Several SAIL students were unaware that you have to pay up to \$300 for ambulance services if you do not have private health insurance. They felt that if this was not a free service that this should be taught to newly arrived migrants by immigration caseworkers.

One major issue in regards to healthcare is access to interpreters. It can sometimes take two to three hours to get an interpreter on the phone, even in order to book a doctor's appointment. There were also some instances of medical professionals refusing to treat people because of their difficulties speaking English. Sometimes people have found Arabic speaking doctors or counsellors, which can make dealing with health services much easier.

Usually, if SAIL students require a specialist they go to a major hospital such as Westmead. Access to interpreters at hospitals are better; however going to major (bulk billing) services can mean long waiting lists, and even with Medicare the costs of treatment can be prohibitively expensive. Costs are even greater for those on temporary visas. Temporary visa holders cannot get access to low income health care cards, which means they are charged the full price for medications.

## **Housing**

SAIL students spoke of great difficulty in meeting housing costs while on Centrelink benefits. Rent increases place a strain on household finances, particularly during periods where one or more family members are unable to secure employment.

There have been both positive and negative experiences in securing accommodation. Some SAIL students had great difficulty finding adequate housing, while others did not. Several SAIL students received assistance from immigration caseworkers or from charities such as the Salvation Army to secure housing.

Community support networks are important aspect when deciding where to live. Some SAIL students preferred to live in suburbs that are more expensive because there are more Sudanese people living there. This may also be preferred because there is a greater sense of safety in suburbs with larger proportion of Sudanese residents. Racist behaviour can be more apparent outside of these suburbs.

## **Justice**

Several young SAIL students felt that they could not trust the police. They believe that African Australian males particularly are treated differently by many police. SAIL students have observed groups of African Australian teenagers being stopped randomly and inspected for weapons; and one SAILor observed an African youth being physically assaulted by police. If young people do not comply with police questions then they get into trouble. Some believe that this targeting of African youth is occurring because of the African American gangster stereotype. Those African Australians who may identify with this music genre are more likely to be perceived as troublemakers.

Some SAIL students were hesitant to call the police to report a crime because of the difficulty understanding the police's questions. Because of this, instances of criminal activity against members of the Sudanese community have gone unreported to police. One participant had rocks thrown at her car while she and her children were inside. She did not go to the police to report this incident because she was confused and scared. The local Migrant Resource Centre helped her to get her car repaired from the damage.

There were suggestions that there should be more comprehensive information provided to African Australians about the justice system, their rights and civil duties on arrival to Australia. Other suggestions for building bridges between police and the community include better police cross-cultural awareness training; and youth clubs organised between members of the justice system and the community to create dialogue with youth leaders.