

youth affairs network qld

Multiculturalism: from myth to reality

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About YANQ

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland Inc. (YANQ) is the peak community youth affairs organisation in Queensland. YANQ advocates on behalf of young people in Queensland, especially disadvantaged young people, to government and the community. The interests and well being of young people across the state are promoted by YANQ in the following ways:

- disseminating information to members, the youth sector, and the broader community
- undertaking campaigns and lobbying
- making representations to government and other influential bodies
- resourcing regional and issues-based networks
- consulting and liaising with members and the field
- linking with key state and national bodies
- initiating projects
- hosting forums and conferences
- input into policy development
- enhancing the professional development of the youth sector

Multiculturalism: from myth to reality

In a global context, recent events around the world and at home necessitate an open public debate on multiculturalism and to form effective strategies for community engagement with this issue. Oft times, even within the Community Services Sector, many organisations are increasingly regarding ‘multiculturalism’ as being solely related to issues regarding non-English speaking migrants and refugees. This interpretation and use of ‘multiculturalism’ not only denies the role of English speaking migrants, residents and citizens, but also fails to acknowledge the important contributions that Indigenous peoples play in the construction of effective multiculturalism. Indeed, alienating English speakers and Indigenous peoples by denying them a place within concepts of multiculturalism, may serve instead to reinforce the ‘us and them’ mentality amongst some members of the wider community, in which the somewhat ignorant ideologies of assimilation and total conformity to mainstream ‘Anglo’ culture is a goal.

Identity is a multifaceted concept, with contributing elements such as nationality, nationhood, indigeneity, ethnicity, religion, ‘race’, language and gender playing significant roles. Further contestations arise when people misuse and confuse the terms and implications of ethnicity and nationality. The latter referring – in layman’s terms at least – to a person’s country of citizenship. When used in this manner, as it is in most state and federal government forms, nationality is a purely political, arguably somewhat arbitrary (though still an important), bureaucratic element of identity. Conversely, and more aligned with its anthropological definition, the term may also relate more closely to nationhood – the state of belonging to a particular group of people from the same ethnic and linguistic family (eg. A person of the American Indian Cherokee nation). This latter use of ‘nation’ entwines more closely with ethnicity; a far more prominent facet of identity whether by choice or otherwise of people who are minority group members in a wider society-state. ‘Sense of belonging’ incorporates both nationality, and ethnicity, but often, minority group members are forced into relating more intimately with their ethnic identity than their nationality (in this case used as citizenship) when confronted by others who question their right to belong.

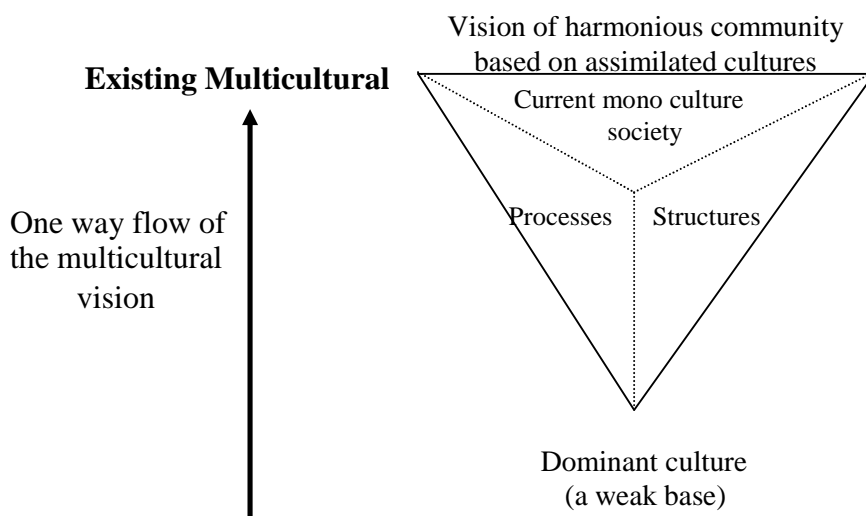
The Encarta Concise English Dictionary defines multiculturalism as “relating to, consisting of, or participating in the cultures of different countries, ethnic groups or religions” while online dictionaries define it as “the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society, as a state or nation”. In view of these definitions, by denying Anglo-Australians in particular a role within multiculturalism, we not only deny that they have culture, but (due to their majority) also simultaneously label them as the base to which all other peoples must conform in order to be ‘Australian’. Similarly, by denying Indigenous peoples a role, we not only deny that they have culture, but fail to recognise their vital role as the first peoples of the land in which we all now live.

The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ) is of the view that currently there is an absence of whole-of-society commitment to multiculturalism due to:

- The existence of a major power imbalance between cultures in Australia;
- The dominance of the Anglo culture in processes, systems and institutions;
- Lack of cultural equity, limiting the participation of minority cultures in contributing to policy aims and objectives; and
- Not acknowledging the culture of the Indigenous people as the basis for multiculturalism in Australia.

Therefore, YANQ believes that the current framework for multiculturalism is heavily ingrained in the structures and processes of the dominant culture, of which non-dominant cultures become subjects of prejudice and discrimination as a result of the unchallenged dominant culture. This inevitably leads to the weakening of the base on which multiculturalism is built upon, as multiculturalism is pursued on existing dominant culture's structures and processes, with the non-dominant cultural groups forced to conform to the so-called "multicultural" framework of the dominant culture. It flows that culturally diverse communities cannot identify with the dominant culture's vision for multiculturalism, becoming distant from the vision itself. Diagram 1.0 is a visual representation of the existing multicultural framework.

Diagram1.0



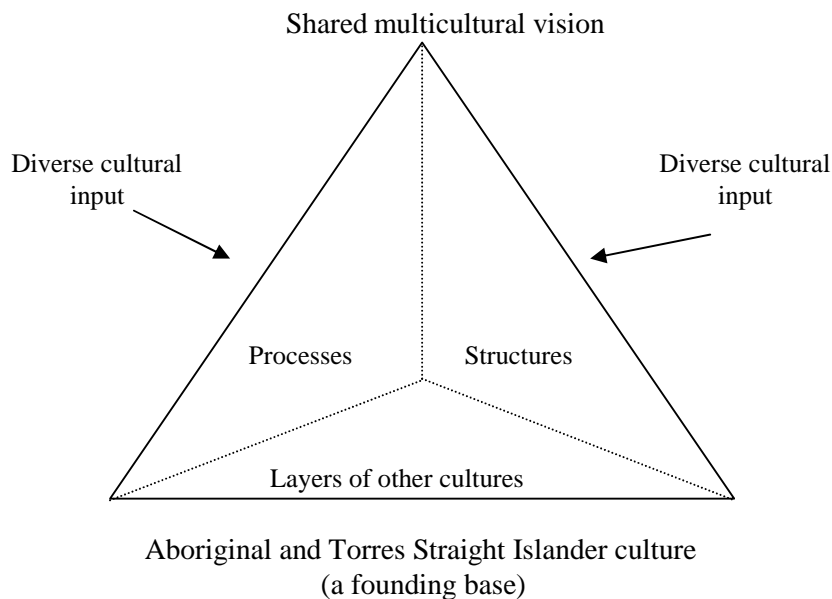
If the existing framework's processes and structures continue to perpetuate the dominant culture and are not founded on a strong unified base, there is a potential for disharmony within and across communities, making them vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination.

To move beyond the existing framework for multiculturalism, YANQ firmly believes that the first cultures of Indigenous people must be acknowledged as a basis for multiculturalism, ensuring that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are recognised for their influential role in laying the foundation for cultural diversity in Australia. These first cultures on which other cultures can be built, provide strength for cultural harmony in Queensland and Australia.

YANQ sees the need for diverse cultural input into the framework for multiculturalism in order to achieve a shared understanding and commitment to multiculturalism in Australia. Diagram 1.1 depicts the proposed framework for multiculturalism

Diagram 1.1

Proposed Multicultural Framework



In the above diagram, the key elements in the proposed framework are:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture as a founding base for multiculturalism
- Layers of other cultures built upon the base of the first Indigenous culture
- Processes involving planning, engagement and implementation
- Structure including systems and institutions are constantly challenged and evolving through diverse cultural input and processes
- Diverse cultural input from all cultures including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, CALD groups, inter-faith groups, Anglo culture and the wider community
- A shared vision for multiculturalism that is underpinned by processes, structures and diverse community input firmly established on a strong foundation

The proposed framework allows individuals and groups across all cultures in Australia to contribute towards the achievement of multiculturalism through active and continuing engagement in the policy debate.

Ultimately, if multiculturalism is treated as an old politically correct buzz word which has passed its used by date, we will revert back to the assimilation policy. This top down process will allow the dominant culture to maintain its cultural hegemony in Australia.

Alternatively the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) sector can rise up to the challenge by facilitating diverse cultural input into the multicultural framework in order to achieve a shared understanding and commitment to multiculturalism in Australia.

Australia is multi ethnic but remains a mono-culture society, insofar as Anglo Australian culture is continued to be identified simultaneously as 'without' culture, and as the base to which all others should conform. Multiculturalism is the aspiration of Australian citizens who believe in the strength in our cultural diversity.