

Strengthening Multiculturalism

To the Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism,

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to your inquiry. We are a team of researchers with expertise in the fields of religious diversity, education about religions and beliefs, religion and youth, countering violent extremism, and education, secularism and sexuality. Between us, we have a demonstrated track record of excellence in these fields, evident in our extensive amount of publications, media commentary, international collaboration and grant successes, notably a 2016-2018 Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant investigating ‘Young Australians’ perspectives on religions and non-religious worldviews,’ in collaboration with leading global experts from the University of Warwick (UK), and participation in the ‘Religion and Diversity Project,’ led by the University of Ottawa (Canada).

Although in international comparative terms Australia has an enviable record of religious tolerance and social cohesion, incidents of discrimination, vilification and other forms of exclusion and bigotry on the basis of ‘race’, colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief are disturbingly increasing (Markus 2016). International crisis events, political leadership and the media can all play significant roles in exacerbating or ameliorating these tensions (Bouma et al. 2007). Education is also an important factor in countering negative stereotypes, often perpetuated by the media and political figures following crisis events, and of deepening understanding of cultural and religious diversity.

The central argument of our submission is that education in Australia must play a stronger role in strengthening multiculturalism, and promoting social inclusion and respect for diverse cultures, religions and worldviews. Australia is now a multicultural, multifaith and non-religious society, and the current treatment of religion in the Australian Curriculum doesn’t adequately address this reality. Nor does it sufficiently respond to counteract the negative perceptions of religions, and particularly of Muslims and Hindus in Australia who report the highest levels of discrimination (Markus 2016).

While the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has, on the advice of academic experts and peak faith and non-faith bodies, provided some opportunities for teaching about diverse religions and worldviews across the curriculum, we suggest that ACARA and all Australian states should look toward the way in which Victoria has highlighted the importance of ‘Learning about worldviews and religions’ in its Curriculum in The Humanities¹ and Ethical Capability², first introduced in 2015 (VCAA 2017). All states could benefit from including such content and also in developing more culturally specific resources for an Australian context from K-12. These resources should be developed in consultation with educators, academic experts, and peak faith-based organisations who are members of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO).

In the many studies that we have conducted or contributed to in the past decade, people from culturally and linguistically diverse, and new and emerging communities in Australia have so often voiced the need for more curricula and resources on learning about diverse worldviews and religions, and developing intercultural competences, as strategies to improve social inclusion and to counter violent extremism (Bouma et. al. 2007; Halafoff 2015). Similar calls have been made by global experts in the UK and the EU (Jackson 2014; UNESCO 2013).

Robert Jackson (2014: 19), one of the Chief Investigators of our ARC Project, and author of *Signposts: Policy and Practice for Teaching about Religions and Non-Religious Worldviews in Intercultural Education*, argues that education about diverse worldviews and religions can ‘provide

¹ <http://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/the-humanities/introduction/about-the-humanities>

² <http://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/introduction/learning-in-ethical-capability>

knowledge' but also 'cultivate sensitivity, reciprocity and empathy' and 'combat prejudice, intolerance, bigotry and racism.' He also acknowledges that such programs must be 'supported by high-quality teacher education, rich and varied resources, and ongoing research and evaluation.' While he distinguishes this type of education from religious instruction, he states that it can complement existing faith-based instruction/education programs.

Finally, we suggest that learning about diverse worldviews and religions can play a critical role in improving the expected standards of public discourse about matters of 'race', colour, sexuality, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief, and also in better recognising and valuing the contribution that diverse communities have long brought, and continue to bring to Australian social and community life.

We hope that our current research can continue to provide more empirical evidence on what young Australians know about diverse worldviews and religions, and which factors are shaping their beliefs, in order to inform the production of curricula and resources that will increase students' levels of intercultural and interreligious literacy and understanding.

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