

ACT Skills Commission Interim Report

Comments by Sally D'Souza

*President of Multicultural Women's Advocacy, Inc., CaLD Representative of the ACT
Ministerial Advisory Council for Women*

Introduction

The ACT Government, along with other Australian governments, is facing skill challenges. The ACT Skills Commission Interim Report (commissioned by the ACT Government) highlights 6 key strategies in addressing the following issues:

- Developing local talent
- Attraction and retention strategies
- Areas of acute shortage and strategic importance
- Community Interests
- Skills future

This submission explores these recommendations and advice on possible strategies, approaches, and suggestions that can enhance workforce participation but with a special focus on culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) women living in the ACT. The submission draws on recent research conducted by the Multicultural Women's Advocacy on CaLD women in the ACT and its surrounding region about accessing services in the ACT, titled *It's All Too Hard: Service Barriers Evaluation Report on CaLD women living in the ACT*, and the expertise and feedback from community organisations, training providers, government bodies and employment service providers as members of working committee, Multicultural Employment Taskforce.

The submission highlights the three critical areas of attention that requires financial commitment by the ACT Government, and working in partnership with the Commonwealth Government to develop work reforms in addressing skill challenge issues also faced by CaLD women and members of the CaLD community.

The Multicultural Women's Advocacy, Inc. (MWA) proudly supports initiatives that improve the status of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CaLD) women in the ACT. As the peak body representing a united voice for CaLD women living in the ACT region and its surrounding regions; MWA continues to advocate, exchange information, and cooperate with other community groups, businesses and government agencies to address issues of access and equity in order to improve the status of CaLD women and to enable them to *reach their full potential*.

The underpinnings to this submission reflect on MWA's **Five Key Focus Areas**, which are in accordance with the six objectives of the ACT Women's Plan and some of the ten key themes of the Multicultural Strategy 2006-2011 of the ACT Government. These are:

- 1. Health**
(Including Mental, Emotional and Sexual Health)
- 2. Economic Empowerment**
(Including issues with housing, childcare and employment)
- 3. Women in Decision-Making Roles**
(Including leadership and flexible training and work arrangements)
- 4. Violence Against Women**

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5. Fair Legal Representation

Canberra, The Place To Be

In addressing the current skills challenge in attracting and retaining local workforce, the Interim Report made the following recommendations:

- 1.1 The ACT should set a target of receiving 2% of Australia's annual migrant intake.
- 1.2 Skilled Business Migration program fees and costs to migrants should be eliminated
- 1.3 Resources for the ACT Government 's Skilled Business Migration program should be strengthened to assist with the processing of skilled to the ACT
- 1.4 Tertiary institutions should actively seek opportunities to direct students into the local economy.
- 1.5 The ACT Government should introduce a pilot program to match international students at CIT, ANU and the University of Canberra with appropriate local employers.
- 1.6 Renewed efforts should be made to persuade the Commonwealth Government to give preferential Regional Migrations Status to the ACT for graduate students.
- 1.7 The ACT Government should establish and strongly promote a One Stop Settlement Shop in Canberra to provide information and advice for new arrivals in Canberra.
- 1.8 The ACT Department of Education and Training should undertake a review of the possible removal of school fees for children of visiting overseas academics and students.
- 1.9 The ACT Government review and extend the 'Live in Canberra' campaign to develop tailored approaches to other locations giving the best prospects of recruiting skills in demand in the ACT.

These recommendations are supported but in the following manner:

- The 'Live in Canberra' campaign needs to reflect on the economic lifestyle and empowerment for men, women and families migrating to Canberra. This means that Canberra needs to improve its status of economic empowerment and lifestyle for their workers by developing infrastructures that meet the diverse needs of migrant, interstate and local workers in the ACT.
- The core objective to enhance the economic empowerment and lifestyles of ACT workers is in developing infrastructures that enable workers to make choices that leads them to strengthen their own economic freedom and

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empowerment. A possible approach is to endorse flexible work arrangements, opportunities, conditions and environments in the ACT by providing incentives for participating companies and businesses.

- To develop appropriate resources and support in transiting a migrant into a local worker in the ACT, settlement issues for overseas migrants and interstate workers also need to incorporate issues of housing needs, such as providing transitional, short-to-medium term and special accommodation needs and arrangements for workers migrating to Canberra. A possible strategy is to provide accommodation support service at the "One Stop Settlement Shop" in ACT by a consortium of real estate agents specialising in this area.

- Permitting spouses and dependents of Skilled Business Migrant holders to enter the workforce, or to gain Australian industry work experience, or to upgrade their skills, training and qualifications can strengthen skilled Business Migration program.

Flexible Work Arrangements, Opportunities, Conditions And Environments

To develop infrastructures that enable workers to be economically empowered, the ACT Government working in partnership with the Commonwealth Government can develop work reforms to include the following suggestions:

- A small portion of the employee's income, including superannuation, leave entitlements and child care benefits are directed into the employee's nominated tax-free self-management fund. By doing so, it would enable the employee the flexibility and the freedom to negotiate with their employer on making flexible leave arrangements, including sick, bereavement, carer's, stress, study/training, grandparental and parental leave, without the fear or guilt in seeking approval to access their work benefits. The self-management fund can also provide the employee funds for disablement, involuntary unemployment, worker's compensation and life insurances, should he or she come under such circumstances. For the employee wishing to buy his or her home, the self-management fund can also function as a collateral for bank loan. Such a reform will drastically improve the quality of life for working families.

- To redevelop the Welfare to Work initiative designed by the previous Commonwealth Government to focus on developing the skills and potential of its recipients in a more positive and constructive manner. This can include work reform programs that provides community work experience within a community cultural development framework, basic military experience or training camps, Industry work experience, in conjunctions with workshops of career counselling, leadership training, managing work-life balance, developing communication, inter-personal and self-management skills. By providing the recipients the opportunity to choose from a variety of work experience programs and workshops, it can provide the recipients the optimal

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conditions to cultivate their own potential, which can lead to developing more efficient and effective workers in the long term.

- By encouraging employers to provide the basic professional development programs for their demographic of workers can lead to healthier working environment. For example, for companies with a large portion of CaLD workers, can offer English classes, Literacy classes, and Cultural Awareness workshops on site. There can also be incentives for companies wishing to promote a healthy work environment. For example, reducing premiums on workers compensation by offer classes that enhance the well-being of their staff.

Working in the Right Position

To develop local talent, increase participants and address areas of acute shortage and strategic importance, the Interim Report made a list of recommendations that included the following:

- 2.3 The Department of Education and Training should further develop Student Pathways planning for all students from Year 9 to 12.
- 2.7 The ACT Government should provide resources for a Skills Centre with dedicated facilitators to link training providers, employers, and employees to promote and implement skill development in industries and sectors experiencing skills shortages.
- 4.1 ACT Government employment policy should develop a specific program to provide transitional arrangements and part-time work to groups of re-entrants (in cooperation with the Commonwealth)
- 4.2 The ACT Government should resource facilitators to work with Job Network agencies, DEWR, Centrelink, Registered Training Organization providers and employers to assist with 'home to work' transitional of principal carer parents. They would also liaise with agencies, employers, and individuals to assist in finding suitable childcare, education and training, arranging voluntary mentors and assistance with transport.

All these recommendations are significant because they assist in providing well-designed work and training arrangements to suit specific needs of the individual and industries in providing a variety of flexible work pathways, which incorporates training, industry experience and community mentoring is sound. There is a need, however, in the ACT to establish a Skills Centre that specifically caters to overseas migrant and CaLD members of the ACT community. This is to ensure that their specific needs and working arrangements can be negotiated between the facilitators and participating businesses, companies, and government bodies, and to assist in developing well-designed work and training arrangements that can be packaged and market to employers interested in hiring CaLD workers.