



Quality Standards in Settlement – Summary of Responses to the Discussion Paper 2010

Introduction

In the Settlement Council of Australia's inaugural work plan, covering the period from 2008 to 2011, one of the key action areas identified was the development of National Standards and best practice models for settlement service delivery in Australia.

As part of the process of developing such standards, the Council has embarked on a number of measures, which together have the aim of informing this process. These include:

- Researching quality standards and best practice models from related sectors in Australia
- Researching settlement standards that have been developed in other countries
- Seeking examples of best practice in various aspects of settlement service delivery from across the SCOA membership and the broader settlement sector
- Seeking the views of SCOA members regarding the nature and scope of quality standards aimed at covering settlement service delivery in Australia

This report provides a summary of the responses received from SCOA members to a brief discussion paper and questionnaire that was sent to SCOA members in February 2010. Eleven SCOA members provided written responses to the questions in the discussion paper, with responses received from members in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. For each of the questions asked, a brief overview of the responses is given, along with quotes taken from the individual responses provided by member organisations.

1. What should the scope of SCOA's quality standards / quality approach be?

There was strong support from those who responded to the questionnaire for the development of quality standards / quality approach for settlement service delivery. Some of the key points raised by respondents included:

- The "need to build a base of guidelines" for service delivery
- The importance of having "systems in place to ensure quality"
- The "need for standardisation across states" ensuring "equitable services", despite significant differences in the size of agencies and the settlement patterns in different locations

- Recognition that the settlement sector requires “a specific set of skills and experience”
- A system is needed that “provides credibility to the Australian Refugee Program”
- Providing an “ongoing mechanism for review”
- Linking quality standards to the development of the new Settlement Framework
- The need to encompass the “challenges of regional settlement”

With regards to specific areas that the quality standards should address, a number of suggestions and recommendations were made. These include:

- **Policy and Procedures**, eg OHS, Grievance procedures, Staff HR processes and diversity
- **Code of Conduct** regarding clients and ethical behaviour
- **Project management planning**, which could involve a tool like Prince2 , which helps workers determine the viability of undertaking a project
- **Simple Business Plan templates**
- **HR functions**, including recruitment, screening, selection, training, support, feedback, continuous improvement
- **Minimum professional qualifications** and skills requirements for different levels of work, eg. community development, social work
- **Appropriate levels of supervision** for bi-lingual community workers etc, in order to “encourage and develop skill base in communities”
- **National benchmarks** for settlement services that are relatively easy to measure
- **Minimum organisational and program standards** for settlement service providers
- **Model job descriptions**, core knowledge of settlement practitioners and established basic standards in service, while allowing for regional variation
- **A model performance evaluation tool** that will identify skills and training requirements
- **Recruitment and governance guidelines** for board directors in order to enhance organisational accountability and effectiveness

However, despite the overall level of support for the development of quality standards, concern was expressed by several respondents. There was concern that the sector may end up with a system that is “far too prescriptive”, and which “channels much needed resources towards an activity that is arguably not essential”.

2. What would you like to see the project achieve?

The comments received from SCOA members to this question were very broad and varied. Some focused on more specific issues regarding standards that should be included in the framework, whilst other responses were much more broad-based and aspirational.

The more aspirational comments tended to focus on SCOA’s role and influence as a peak; as well as comments regarding the impact that the development of quality standards might have on the settlement sector, and the way the sector is perceived by other stakeholders, including government. These comments included:

- “SCOA being a peak body who is well positioned to send messages out to the broader sector and support small organisations or organisations that do not have a strong infrastructure to improve their systems, professionalise the service sector and advocate on behalf of the sector”

- “Acknowledgement of the skills and professionalism of workers in the sector and a commitment by government to fund accordingly”
- “A further outcome should [be to] change the mode of operation of settlement services from being reactive to proactive e.g. support clients early in their settlement journey through aspects of adjustment and education to reduce the likelihood of people needing crisis and intensive support services later in settlement”
- “The standards proposed by SCOA may have the capacity to impact on the flexibility of government contracts. For example, reaffirming the need for flexibility in the type of services delivered to suit the various backgrounds of people being resettled (e.g. single males versus large families)”
- “In the future, I would like to see SCoA being able to scrutinise an agency through appropriate documentation and provide a stamp of approval”
- “To set standards for settlement services, there is a virtue in outlining a range of service types rather than prescribing exact services because one size does not fit all”

In terms of more specific outcomes for this project, the comments included:

- “I think if this project could develop a baseline sample of good quality systems approach/framework which could be shared by the sector as good practice would be great”
- “Hopefully the project could provide simple support resources which help organisations to improve quality standards and not confusing and excessive processes that some Government departments implement”
- “SCOA should promote understanding of important theoretical approaches such as that of Ecological Theory of Refugee Resettlement (e.g. Miller and Rasco) within the refugee sector to ensure that optimal settlement outcomes are achieved”
- “The project should provide the basis for standardised recruitment of staff, setting benchmarks and performance assessment across all settlement services”
- “Two levels of standards: organisational and service provision - guidelines that would promote a baseline for an organisation: supervision, employment practices etc. And service provision: cultural appropriateness, community relevance etc”
- “It is important that organisations take into account such things as risk management, continuous improvement, occupational health and safety, strategic planning/thinking, disability access and inclusion, EEO etc”
- “To develop clear tools of settlement in relation to that ALL the services of settlement and inclusive of the range of workers involved from Managers, Caseworkers and bi cultural workers”

3. How general or specific should the outcomes be?

Most respondents felt that the outcomes of the project should include both general and specific outcomes, and provide a balance between the two. This would include a general framework which allows flexibility in recognition of a “constantly changing landscape”, but with specific aspects. Comments included:

- “It should be a mixture of specific outcomes for those essential items and then others that are general to allow for flexibility. I can’t predict the mix now”
- “Outcomes should hopefully be general enough to be a useful resource but not so specific as to be over-complicating things”
- “A general framework designed around social justice and human rights. Specifics should face the challenges of a constantly changing landscape of different client group needs, challenges of working with boundaries, intercultural differences and professionalism”
- “The outcomes of the quality standards should be specific, however they should reflect that there are multiple pathways to achieve the standards required. For example, with qualifications, they could encompass post-graduate training, undergraduate degrees (e.g. Social Science Majoring in Resettlement), recognition of prior learning. However, the standards should not be so specific so as to limit the capacity of individuals from a refugee background transitioning into the settlement sector”
- “It is important that organisations take into account such things as risk management, continuous improvement, occupational health and safety, strategic planning/thinking, disability access and inclusion, EEO etc. So my suggestion would be to focus on the macro rather than quality standards for each aspect of service delivery”
- “General outcomes: achievements to be measured against national standards of competency;
Specific outcomes: a minimum skill level (including qualifications) required by staff. This would place some restrictions on those settlement agencies who hire bilingual staff that have no further qualifications than belonging to the target refugee community. This outcome would require agencies to keep to a professional standard of service, regardless of a case managers’ cultural background, which would still allow for the development career paths for refugee workers without compromising casework standards. Different positions within settlement services require different skills and some positions do not require qualifications this also needs to be acknowledged”
- “It would be great to actually have a document at the end of this project which could be used as a template by the sector. Professionalize the sector and move forward, being recognized by mainstream services and government as experts in the field and taken seriously”

4. Can you suggest any examples of quality standards and approaches that may be useful for SCOA to draw upon for this project?

Many of the respondents provided examples of quality standards and approaches that they thought might be useful for SCOA to consider, including several examples that are already used by SCOA members in other areas of their work. These examples included:

- Australian Association of Social Work
- Australian Psychological Society - “particularly the ethical guidelines, ISO standards, and existing requirements stipulated by the Department of Immigration as being integral to the delivery of settlement services”
- The grant applications from DIAC and other government departments
- National Standards for Volunteers. “They speak about processes which closely relate to HR functions - screening, selection, training, support, feedback, continuous improvement”
- “Canada and NZ have established National Standards for settlement services, similar what Australia had under the NISS framework”

- Australian Council for International Development
- ISO9000 / Integrated Quality Business Management System framework
- “There may be examples in the aged care and children's services fields”
- Human Rights instruments Tool (HRIT) developed by Centre for Refugee Research
- Quality approaches developed by SCOA members including Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre and MRCSA
- Case Management Society of Australia. “Though not all settlement work consists of case management, there are some standards of practice and professional development that are worth examining”
- SA Department of Families and Communities Service Excellence Partners handbook

5. Would someone from your organisation be interested in taking part in the Working Group to assist in overseeing this project?

Of the 11 member organisations that provided written responses to the discussion paper, six expressed interest in being involved in the steering group to oversee the development of the quality standards for settlement.

6. Are there any other comments you would like to make about this area of work?

A number of additional comments were made by those who responded to the discussion paper. These comments covered a range of topics, including resource issues, international comparisons, linkages to other emerging issues in Australia, and workforce development. The comments under each of these themes are included below.

a) Resource Issues:

- “DIAC and other appropriate funding bodies must appropriately resource services to develop and / or implement the framework that SCOA is developing”

b) International Comparisons

- “SCOA would benefit from studying the operation of some international standards. There are various forms of quality accreditation across the service sector, as well as the education and training sectors, that offer an opportunity for service development. Useful comparisons may be made with mental health services, disability, aged care and indigenous services. Though not all subject to equal forms of public scrutiny, they do operate within established service frameworks in sensitive areas.”

c) Linkages with Other Emerging Issues:

- “The work we (MDA, ACL, AMES and Margaret Piper Associates) are doing to develop assessment and training resources to support delivery of the recently accredited Settlement electives in the Community Services Training Package will hopefully also contribute to strengthening professional practice across the sector”

- “An emerging issue is the new Modern Awards and how these will impact on operations, especially in the transition process where all staff need to be evaluated against the new definitions. This will create enormous workloads and it would be ideal to have a national approach whereby roles are defined and pro-forma PD's developed that can be applied across the sector”
- “It is important that the recommendations reflect that in addition to skills specific to the refugee resettlement and CALD sectors, all settlement workers must demonstrate competency in the area of linking clients with mainstream services, negotiating and advocating on behalf of clients with mainstream services (e.g. mental health), and have an understanding of the terminology and approach implemented by those services to effectively engage clients. Without this, clients are being limited in the range of services which can provide support, and will promote the current practices of mainstream agencies placing the onus on settlement services which are not funded long-term”

d) Workforce Development

- “Professionalising the sector would allow settlement organisations to put Bilingual Workers on a career pathway, as they can develop their skills which can be recognised in future”
- “The SCOA standards should acknowledge that settlement staff will require a diverse range of skills and education backgrounds. For example, some staff will specialise in assessment and goal setting, mental health assessments etc. Then other settlement staff such as case workers would be responsible for implementing the settlement plan developed by the assessor. A group approach should be encouraged with a diverse range of skills”

Conclusion

Despite some concerns about the potential for quality standards to be prescriptive and restrictive in their approach, there is generally strong support for the development of a quality framework to support and underpin the work of settlement service organisations. One respondent concluded by saying “this is an important and very necessary project and I hope that it will provide sound guidelines not only for direct settlement workers, but for workers in generic services that encounter refugees and migrants in the delivery of their work. It will contribute to an increased cultural competence in all areas of service delivery. Good Luck and well done for the initiative”. This level of support indicates that now is a very good time for SCOA and its members to begin the task of developing a quality framework and setting benchmarks for service delivery.

Andrew Cummings
Executive Officer
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