

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

February 2007

Bilingual Worker Submission
Centre for Culture Ethnicity and Health
81-85 Barry Street
Carlton VIC 3053

**ECCV Submission to the Discussion Paper:
*Defining a Bilingual Worker***

1. *Does the definition contain the important elements of what defines a bilingual worker?*

ECCV welcomes the Discussion Paper, *Defining a Bilingual Worker*, and the acknowledgement of both the complexity and importance of developing an appropriate definition for bilingual workers. The proposed definition towards the end of the paper is a useful start.

A suitable definition of a bilingual worker should include the two qualities that are fundamental to this role—firstly linguistic proficiency and secondly cultural and contextual understanding.

With regard to cultural understanding, ECCV considers the term 'shared meaning' more suitable than the term 'values' which is used in the current draft definition. The term 'shared meaning' has been used by Professor Megan Jane Johnstone.

The term 'values' implies that cultures are fixed and rigid constructs which may not necessarily reflect the reality of the great diversity within cultures. 'Shared meaning' is a term that better acknowledges the complexity within and around different cultures, including contextual understanding.

2. *Are there any other considerations that should be included in this definition?*

A suitable definition of a bilingual worker should incorporate the premise that the linguistic capacities of the worker are accredited in some form. Bilingualism implies a certain level of proficiency, but to the best of our knowledge no accreditation system exists in the aged care or health services system that tests this proficiency.

Bilingual workers should be assessed through formal accreditation. Workers and particularly their employers need to have an appropriate mechanism to determine the bilingual proficiency of their staff. Employers, staff and clients need to be assured that bilingual staff are undertaking their bilingual roles with a certain degree of

professionalism. A short practical training course should be developed for bilingual workers.

To assist in the development of an appropriate testing and accreditation mechanism the issue of what is “a basic level of knowledge of the language” (page 5) needs to be determined. The importance of ongoing training for bilingual workers also needs to be recognised.

Once an appropriate testing and accreditation system is developed there also needs to be further consideration of the appropriate level of remuneration of bilingual workers.

3. *Should biculturalism - negotiating between two cultures - form part of the definition of bilingual worker?*

ECCV would strongly recommend that the inclusion of culture be incorporated into the definition of a bilingual worker. Further, it is not only the culture of a worker’s homeland that would be acknowledged in this definition. The ability to successfully negotiate between a range of cultures (which entails the concept of ‘shared meaning’) also needs to be recognised.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the ability to negotiate between cultures and use more than one language proficiently is not just reserved for those people who were born or raised in a given country or culture. Cultural sensitivity can be successfully developed by workers from different backgrounds to their clients and effectively implemented in their work.

There are also instances of workers and clients who do not share a common language but share common cultural traits who interact well together. Clients may feel more comfortable dealing with workers who share similar cultural experiences and understandings, if not the same language. This form of ‘shared meaning’ needs to be considered for possible inclusion in the scope of determining testing mechanisms for bilingual workers, at least on the ‘cultural understanding’ side of the equation.

4. *Any additional comments?*

It is important to make a clear distinction between the role of a bilingual worker and that of an interpreter. Whilst bilingual workers may at times perform interpreter like activities their role is completely different to professionally accredited interpreters. The important distinction between interpreters and bilingual workers with regards to issues like the different levels of language skills and the different employment role (including different levels of professionalism) needs to be acknowledged from the outset. Interpreters have clearly defined roles often around providing high-level and accurate interpretation services of specific and

often highly important information, often on a word-for-word basis. A bilingual worker's use of language may be more likely to be based around routine information and tasks and involve less formal and more selective interpretation around key information.

Some models presented in the paper regarding bilingual workers suggest that English language proficiency is not critical to the role in their work as community educators. One could question the capacity of these individuals in their peer education role if their English language proficiency is not sufficient to understand the original material which they must then convey in their own community language discussions.

In addition, the paper also states that the language aides 'must undertake training' (page 10). This statement is correct with regard to language aides employed by the Darebin City Council. However, not all local government agencies require a formal level of training for their language aides.

5. *Conclusion*

ECCV supports the Discussion Paper's initial attempts to develop an appropriate definition of a bilingual worker but believes the importance of biculturalism should be further developed. ECCV strongly supports the development of a testing and accreditation system to establish bilingual workers' proficiency and the further development of appropriate remuneration criteria for this group of workers. The competency of bilingual workers should be established through the implementation of an appropriate assessment tool.