



ethnic  
communities'  
council of  
victoria

# Access and Equity CALD Focus Group Consultation

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Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV) warmly thanks the participants who took part in this consultation and acknowledges their valuable contribution.

## **Date**

Friday 3 February 2012

## **Venue**

ECCV  
Statewide Resources Centre,  
150 Palmerston St  
Carlton VIC

## **Representatives**

Participants represented:

- new and emerging communities with settlement needs
- older culturally diverse people with aged care needs
- international student's with health, transport and settlement needs

## **Introduction**

ECCV believes that Access and Equity should be the cornerstone of service delivery for our multicultural community. All Victorians should be able to use government services where and when they need them regardless of their cultural and linguistic or religious backgrounds.

ECCV is taking part in the Access and Equity Inquiry that is looking into the responsiveness of Australian Government services to our culturally and linguistically diverse population.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of the focus group was to:

1. Provide ECCV members with the opportunity to discuss any good, and not so good, experiences with Australian Government services and to suggest ways to improve them.
2. Provide insights into access and equity issues experienced by CALD participants and their communities to assist ECCV in its submission to the Inquiry.

## Notes of responses to the following questions were discussed

### 1. What Australian Government services do you and your community use most (for example: employment, health, welfare)?

Older people from non-English speaking backgrounds used:

- Aged care services provided by local, State and Federal Governments

International students experienced difficulties with:

- transport, health and taxation issues

People from new and emerging communities needed help with:

- applying for a Tax file number; registering with Medicare; obtaining employment; housing; schooling and immigration issues
- counselling and support regarding family conflict, domestic violence and homelessness for both men and women from non-English speaking backgrounds

Other issues included advice and support service for

- unfair workplace issues
- making consumer complaints.

### 2. Have you or your community found it easy or difficult to use these services?

All participants agreed that the over focus on online content was difficult for those in their communities. It was felt that due to varying levels of computer literacy among CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) groups, this increased the pressure that was placed on ethno-specific agencies, as increasing numbers of community members attend their offices, seeking assistance with online forms and information (including Centrelink forms). Ethno-specific community organisations are in most cases the first point of call for those seeking accessible information.

It was felt that language barriers were not being adequately addressed.

It was felt that a toll-free number for interpreter assistance would be helpful, and that government websites should promote this service in a range of community languages and using visual cues.

International students commented that while most of them were “tech savvy”, they often found government websites to be overloaded with overly-complex information and unfamiliar terminology. It was observed that international students are reluctant, for these reasons to utilise government websites, turning to fellow students, ethno specific organisations and informal friends and contacts for (often non-expert) advice instead.

With regard to accessing services via the telephone, participants observed that community members often did not feel listened to by telephone staff, saying that they did not feel that their circumstances were being understood or that their difficulties were important and of concern to the person they were talking to. In many cases, it was observed, people feel like they are talking to a “brick wall” when speaking to service staff. It was also commented that long holds and referral roundabouts added another disincentive to accessing government services by phone.

Participants noted that when people from non-English speaking backgrounds engage with service providers, their expectation of support is not met and they lose confidence and feel disappointed by service support staff.

Many tire of “referral roundabouts” and script-like responses they are given and give up. Then they either disengage from support services, or return to their community agency for help.

It was felt that government service staff should be provided with cultural responsiveness training and not subject to strict performance target arrangements, which may require them to move hastily through calls, when more time and consideration is needed.

### **3. In your experience, do Australian Government services adapt to the needs of people from your cultural or language background?**

Participants felt that culturally competent communication is vital for all aspects of service delivery to break down barriers and improve access to information and support. They had difficulties getting staff on telephone help lines to listen to their stories and came away feeling frustrated and without relevant advice.

### **4. If you or your community have had problems, what were they? Did they get resolved?**

#### Transport

- International students reported they do not have access to public transport concessions which adds the expense of student life or they avoid using transport.

#### Health

- International students had health insurance that covers the minimum of health needs. Some students had difficulties accessing public hospitals or were even denied access in serious cases of illness and during pregnancies.

#### Online services

- Whilst Centrelink claims can be made on-line, not everyone from new and emerging communities has a computer and some have no prior experience with computer and the internet. They continue to seek support from settlement services in ethnic organisations. These issues were resolved through providing detailed and time-consuming one-to-one support in ethnic community organisations.

One comment was, “On-line claims are supposed to make people more self-reliant but the number of people requesting support form ethnic organisations had not reduced.”
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#### Unfair dismissals

- There appears to be a considerable number of non-English speaking people from refugee backgrounds who get jobs and then after a while lose their jobs in instances of perceived discrimination. They, or their advocate, struggled to find assistance or even to have the case heard over the phone, via websites and in person to Worksafe Victoria and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC). Culturally diverse people requesting assistance felt they were led on a “referral roundabout” and had to contact many different places to raise their issue regarding personal rights. Outcomes often resulted in unresolved

issues or advice to engage a lawyer which was not feasible for people on low incomes who are trying to get settled in Australia.

A typical comment was, "I didn't even get 50 percent of the assistance I expected and some people were just not listening to me – we just lose trust in the system."

#### Consumer complaints

- People from non-English speaking backgrounds contacting Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) by phone with a complaint felt they did not get a beneficial or positive response. They felt that the person on the telephone did not listen and persisted in repeating standard phrases. As a result people lost faith in the system and did not attempt to pursue their rights.
- Access to the ACCC website was confusing and unhelpful. The result was escalated feelings for frustration and confusion and lost trust in the system that should address their rights and complaints and low levels of satisfaction due to unresolved outcomes.

#### Taxation issues

- An international student spoke about difficulties she had when lodging a tax return. The financial strain of being a student, with limited earning capacity and very little government support led her to try to lodge her own tax return rather than seek professional assistance.
- The confusion related to the question of whether she was an Australian Resident, for tax purposes. Not being an Australian resident, as far as she understood it, she answered no to this and was then required to pay 30 percent of her earnings in tax. She attempted to call the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) regarding the question of her residential status, but did not find them to be helpful. After her phone call to them she remained under the false impression that she was not an Australian resident for tax purposes. In the end a fellow international student (accountancy student) advised her that she had made an error and suggested that she fill out an amendment form. Once this was done, she had to place two follow up calls to the ATO as no action was initially taken. Following this, the matter was resolved. It is important to keep in mind that the woman in question here has a tertiary level education and perfect English proficiency, this situation would have been even more challenging for someone with little English or education.
- It was suggested that awareness raising was required among international students with regard to taxation issues. At no point did this student come across promotion of the Tax-Help program, which suggests this initiative needs to be better promoted.
- The participant also commented that, although some students experience quality orientation in their country of origin many do not and, upon arrival in Australia, orientation is mainly related to academic matters, not government supports.

A typical student's comment was, "We don't have taxation or legal advice. Some universities have better support than others. It's really confusing for students."

### Housing and homelessness

A participant reported that in situations of family conflict vital support is provided by women's refugees and related counselling however there were often no supports for men from non-English speaking backgrounds at risk homelessness.

The migration community consists of both permanent residents and people from non-English speaking backgrounds on temporary visas. Workers on a Temporary Class 457 Visa experienced, despite having jobs, experienced homelessness due to lack of money to support themselves and employers placing them in an hotel at an unreasonable distance from the place of employment.

*A participants commented, "One person was placed in the hotel at the Tullamarine airport and had to work in Dandenong."*

## **5. If you or your community have had good experiences, what services worked best for you? Why do you think they worked so well for you?**

### Best practice website

Participants found the DIAC website easy to use for on-line information and highlighted it as a best practice example of online information.

### Tax Help

- An ethnic settlement service provided a free bilingual 'Tax Help Volunteer' services that worked well for new and emerging communities.

*A typical comment was, "Taxation is a big issue for new and emerging communities and the Tax Help Volunteer system works well."*

### Telephone Interpreter Services (TIS)

- Participants reported the TIS was very helpful when accessing Government services. It was helpful when the national TIS symbol was prominently displayed on government websites.

### Partnerships with ethnic agencies

A local council organised a multicultural responsiveness event in partnership with local community groups, for example the Cambodian community was invited to a local hospital provide cultural briefings for nurses, doctors, police and city councils.

### Ethno-specific settlement support

Regarding ethno-specific settlement support a participant indicated that the numbers of clients are increasing whilst DIAC funding targets have stayed the same or are cut back. In addition the people from refugee backgrounds require support beyond their initial five years of settlement due to cultural and linguistic disadvantage.

## **6. What are the best ways for the Australian Government to tell you about its services and how to access them?**

Regarding access to information, it was suggested that web based approaches can work, but only if ethno specific agencies are better resourced so that they can offer assistance. It was observed that joint ethnic community/government partnerships in running community education and awareness raising programs would be very valuable.

Also desirable is a toll-free, language accessible phone number that could act as a one stop shop for government services.

International students reported that they prefer to receive information through more innovative approaches, including social media, animation and visuals as this is more accessible and engaging than the high volume of complex written information presented to students at orientation and when they click on to a government website.

A new and emerging group representative commented that posters, flyers, CDs/DVDs and language accessible websites all work well and are well liked by his community.

All participants agreed that there are too many different sources of information and that information needs to be simplified and centralised. A one-stop-online-shop for government services would be helpful, where people could click on a general area of interest and find links to more specialist services.

### **7. Are there ways Australian Government services could be improved to help you or your community access them better?**

International students suggested that language barriers are a major issue so visual cues may assist in getting information across. They welcomed internet information campaigns developed in partnerships between the government and ethnic youth organisations. Improvements they recommended included the use of animations, social media networks, Facebook and twitter as well as links to specific services. A best practice example was the [thinkbefore.com](http://thinkbefore.com) website, a student safety initiative that focuses on safety awareness when travelling at night and on public transport routes supported by a range of government departments and tertiary institutions. They valued its simplicity, links and animations.

Participants noted that it was not always easy to find interpreter services support. They recommended clearer and more obvious promotion of the national telephone interpreter symbol on government websites.



All participants spoke to the need for more plain English and the elimination of jargon from government services websites.

All mentioned that better support for and partnerships with ethno-specific agencies is essential in order to provide the support that CALD people require when navigating unfamiliar processes and formats.

### **8. Most Australian Government services have standards about how they deliver services to you. Do you think there should be specific standards to make sure culture or language doesn't make it harder for people to get the help they need?**

Participants valued the Australian Government service standards to assist people from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. They felt however that there was room to improve the implementation of such standards and to ensure that they are effectively practiced through:

- Developing policies and support in partnership with ethnic organisations and community input

- Capacity building for ethno-specific agencies to provide support beyond the initial five years DIAC funded settlement support.
- Providing education and training for people from new and emerging communities on using computers and the Internet to access information.
- Use of social media networks and innovative media to reach younger people.
- Easy language access and cross-cultural communication
- Culturally responsive trained staff that take time to listen and understand when interacting with people from non-English speaking backgrounds
- Prominent display of the National Interpreter Symbol
- Multilingual information using a variety of multimedia especially in audio format
- Culturally responsive management of grievances and complaints
- Social housing support provided by employers.

International students wish to highlight the strong desire of the international student community to be able to access government support, most specifically in the area of transport (student concessions) and health care. They also seek more support from government in order to better understand visa arrangements and taxation.

A typical was, “Many international students felt discriminated against and excluded from the Australian community, despite their contributions, both cultural and financial, to our institutes of higher learning.”

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