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Eccv submission to the Commonwealth Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into Multiculturalism and the Contribution of Migration to Australian Society.

"The only choice open to any society today is to manage and build on the creative potential of its diversity"

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (eccv) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Commonwealth Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into Multiculturalism and the Contribution of Migration to Australian Society at the public hearing on 29 March 2011 in Melbourne at the Centre for Dialogue at La Trobe University.

About eccv

The eccv is a state-wide peak body that advocates to all levels of government on behalf of multicultural communities on a range of issues. For over 35 years eccv has remained the principal liaison point between ethnic communities, government and the wider community and has been a key player in building Victoria as a successful, harmonious and multicultural society.

With around 200 members we represent over 60 ethnicities and 65,000 individuals.

The majority of our members are not-for-profit community service organisations that provide services in areas such as settlement, aged care, anti-discrimination, community harmony, employment, education and training, health and community services, law and justice and arts and culture.

Our vision is of a culturally diverse and harmonious society that is just, fair and inclusive where all people have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to, community life.

We welcome the Commonwealth's more proactive role in leading the re-invigoration of the multicultural agenda and applaud the adoption of a new Multicultural policy, "The People of Australia". We also welcome this opportunity to present our case to the inquiry for a renewed political and social commitment to multicultural Australia as an overarching policy for Australia.

We believe there are 9 principles which should underpin Australia's Multicultural Agenda.

1. Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islanders are the first Australians
2. Equality
3. Equal Dialogues
4. Right to cultural maintenance
5. Responsibility for cross and intercultural engagement

Statewide Resources Centre
150 Palmerston Street
Carlton Victoria 3053

t 03 9349 4122
f 03 9349 4967
eccv@eccv.org.au
www.eccv.org.au

ABN 65071572705



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6. Multicultural society is a valuable Australian asset
7. Recognition of the historic contributions of all Australians
8. Languages are important expressions of culture
9. Creation of an inclusive Australian identity

Having outlined the principles we feel are key to underpinning a successful multicultural Australia, we provide the following comments under the headings in the inquiry's Terms of Reference:

Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

1. The role of multiculturalism in the federal government's social inclusion agenda

eccv recognises that "multiculturalism" is an increasingly complex social aim. This is why it is imperative for Australian political leadership to back the reality of multicultural Australia with political will. We do not want the divisive trends that manifest when political will does not champion the cause of diversity which leads to the dangerous disempowerment of significant sectors of the population.

In Victoria we enjoy strong and bi-partisan support for multiculturalism which has been the foundation of the higher levels of social cohesion and business activity in this state. Our multicultural society is a valuable Australian asset. Our multicultural policy should proactively promote our multicultural society as a valuable resource and asset in the shaping of Australia's future.

In order to do this, it should support new research and the collection and collation of data on multicultural issues to build an evidence base for future policy in this complex and important area for Australian society.

Multiculturalism is a recognition of and response to the reality of Australia's culturally diverse population. It defines the nature of the relationship between all Australian people, between communities and between government and all Australians as one that upholds the principles of social justice by ensuring that real equality can be achieved only by alleviating inequality.

It recognises that there must be equality of "cultural circumstance" as much as equality of opportunity. This means that while we may be "different" as individuals, communities and cultures, we aim to achieve equality without relinquishing difference and within the legal and social parameters in Australia. Equality of "cultural circumstance" ensures that we do not, explicitly or implicitly, create a hierarchy of cultures, but that we engage in a dialogue, recognising the potential for transformation on all sides

We believe multiculturalism proposes the creation of equal dialogues amongst all Australians within the framework of Australia's legal and political systems. Intercultural interaction and dialogue cannot happen in an unequal playing field where there is "host" and "guest" division. Culture is fluid, the 'us' in 'them and us' doesn't remain static but

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changes over time sometimes without our noticing it. Multiculturalism, as national agenda for all Australians must reject the framework of cultural hierarchy as inherent in labels such as “mainstream culture” or “host culture”.

This does not, however, take away from the unique position that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people occupy in Australia as the First Australians. Equal dialogue is also the basis for reform of our Human Rights and Legal systems to be inclusive, where necessary, of particular concerns of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities including cultural rights, discrimination and racism.

Multiculturalism upholds the right to cultural maintenance. It protects the rights of all Australians to express their cultural heritage, to maintain their languages and religions in equal measure without upholding the rights of any special group as being above the others.

It expects from all Australians the obligation to be proactive in cross cultural and intercultural dialogues at all levels as importantly as maintaining their heritage and culture. Thus it expects Australians to be open to change and to building intercultural communities while enjoying the rights to cultural maintenance

It recognises the fact that language can be both a barrier and an enabler for **social inclusion**. It accepts that language acquisition or maintenance is a cultural issue. As such, it will celebrate and harness the value of a multi-lingual society while strengthening English as the language for communication for all Australians

We want the outcomes of the new National Multicultural policy to be social inclusion and social justice. Culture cannot be wholly equated with other issues such as gender, ageing, disability and the specific issues of settlement. While it is inherent in all of these, it is also larger and more overarching. While the Social Inclusion agenda identifies disadvantage in various domains such as employment, socio economic status and disability, it doesn't link any of these where they intersect with culture.

Culture is not a “vulnerability” in all cases, and it is a universal attribute, we all have a culture of which we are a part. Belonging is the outcome of the acceptance, celebration and the creation of identity through a respectful and voluntary process initiated by individuals in response to their desire to be part of their new home in Australia. The importance of belonging cannot be underestimated and fundamentally affects the ability of individuals and communities to be able to function in any society.

And there are types of disadvantage that are not incorporated in the Social Inclusion agenda that are specific to the migrant and refugee experience such as English language skills.

The first step towards engaging with the new society that migrants confront is to find acceptance for their current identity. Public policy in

Statewide Resources Centre
150 Palmerston Street
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f 03 9349 4967
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this area has to recognise this first step is necessary before they can move on to processes of adapting to a new context. There is evidence that even second and third generations of migrants can still feel that maintaining aspects of their culture is important for their identity.

All people who come to Australia must be made aware of their rights and responsibilities. While this is already being done under some settlement programs, the feedback we receive is that the programs are too intense and often happen at the outset when people are already coping with a large amount of new information. Such education has to be broad based and tailored and should be extended to all categories of arrivals including 457s and students.

Equally important is the idea of cultural development. Cultures are not static bodies of beliefs. There are always reformist movements in all cultures which reflect upon practices and beliefs in the light of new or different information and challenges. In framing cultural development, it is necessary to collaborate with reformist elements within the communities first and to let them lead the development and change. It is equally important to recognise that development can happen on all sides of the discussion.

Eccv's view is that the multicultural agenda cannot be subsumed by **Social Inclusion**. The current Social Inclusion Agenda does not give cultural diversity the significance it needs in order to address social cohesion issues which arise as a consequence of cultural differences.

The areas of exclusion which are related to culture are English language, support for settlement over the life course and cultural competency on all sides to facilitate cross cultural engagement.

eccv argues for broad policy initiatives which would form part of the National Multicultural Agenda and would more appropriately address some of the focus areas of the Social Inclusion agenda.

2. The contribution of diaspora communities to Australia's relationships with Europe, the UK, middle East and the immediate Asia-Pacific Region

There is little doubt Australia's future economic prosperity depends on our ability to embed ourselves in Asia's continued economic growth. However, our education system fails to prepare students to succeed in this new world. The eccv published a paper last year entitled "**I'm Multilingual, Now What?**" in which we highlighted the lack of appropriate career pathways for students who have language skills. The career opportunities open to them to use their language skills are just not there. Employers do not as a rule give sufficient weight to the benefits language skills can bring to improve their business chances in a global trading environment.

For example Asian language education in Australia is typified by too few teachers, teaching in what are often inadequate programs to a small number of students. This means that by the final year of

Statewide Resources Centre
150 Palmerston Street
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f 03 9349 4967
eccv@eccv.org.au
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secondary education, only 6% of students study an Asian language. The fact is that across the whole of Australia only 300 students who are learning Chinese in their final year of secondary school, are not from a Chinese background.

The current situation in Victoria in Language Other Than English (LOTE) learning is a case in point. Over the past 6 years there has been a continual decline in the number of government primary schools offering primary language programs and a concomitant decline in student enrolments. The number of schools offering a language program decreased by 23.4% between 2003 and 2009.

Enrolments in secondary languages programs in Victoria have fluctuated over this same period, but continue to decrease slightly each year, from a high of 53.3% of students in 2003 to 42.4% in 2009. Particularly concerning is the large decrease in enrolments at the year ten level where the percentage of students studying a language declined from 25.7% to 16% between 2003 and 2009.

We note that in Victoria the new government has established a Ministerial Advisory Council for a Multicultural and MULTILINGUAL Victoria. This council inter alia sets out to improve this situation by taking advice on "... workforce and other constraints" in this area and on "...how global education programs can be stimulated." This recognises that the problem is one of lack of continuity in learning.

The eccv urges the government to ensure the national curriculum, due to be finalised this year, prepares students for the modern economy by developing increased cultural literacy with a particular focus on Asia.

The contribution of diaspora communities to our relationships with Europe and the rest of the world can be strengthened by stronger incentives for language maintenance, LOTE language learning and for the acquisition of high levels of English language proficiency.

Diasporas offer linguistic and cultural capacities which become the currency for creating international business opportunities by creating export markets in other countries. Through their knowledge diasporas, their networks and community connections can help to set up bi-lateral trade opportunities for Australia as evidenced by the numbers of bi-lateral chambers of commerce and business councils.

Settlement and participation

3. Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees, that support their full participation and integration into the broader Australian society.

Housing has been cited many times as a key to helping in the early integration of refugees upon arrival into Australia. The Humanitarian Settlement Service (HSS) program should ensure that contractors provide appropriate on-arrival transitional housing to clients for up to six months.

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Within this six-month contract period, HSS contractors should support transition of families into sustainable and affordable ongoing accommodation either through exploring community housing options or supporting clients' access to the private rental market and assist clients to understand tenancy rights and to ensure when exiting IHSS, clients have the relevant knowledge and life skills to negotiate the Australia housing market successfully.

This could be followed by ongoing housing support and a referral service for up to 12 months as needed. This package may include casework, advocacy and brokerage for clients requiring additional support after moving from transitional housing.

Another area that we believe impedes rapid and full integration into the broader Australian community is the lack of consistency in the delivery of on-arrival health assessments and care.

The eccv proposes that the government instigate the development of a National Refugee Health and Wellbeing Strategy, involving Federal and State health departments. Such a strategy would need to incorporate benchmarks for minimal screening and care to be provided within the HSS program, including immunisation and screening for chronic diseases. A recent eccv (as yet unpublished) report on the Implications of refugee settlement for regional health care services found that *"...an emphasis on increasing the health literacy levels of refugees is essential to the continued success of regional refugee settlement"*.

Knowledge of rights, like health literacy are an essential element in increasing participation and the capacity to exercise those rights in a structure of institutions that does not marginalise or exclude them.

Currently, there are wide variations in the resourcing of refugee health services across and within different states and territories. On-arrival health assessments should be undertaken by the most appropriate service, through specialist refugee health services where available or through utilisation of GPs and the uptake of Medicare item MBS 714.

We have a concern that the proposals to move to a network of Medicare locals does not provide for an overarching planning structure that will ensure refugees have access to specialist services where gaps exist.

While the development of specialist refugee health services has worked effectively in some areas of concentrated refugee settlement, other decentralised models may be more appropriate where refugee settlement is more dispersed. In these cases, building the capacity of primary healthcare services in local areas to provide culturally appropriate assessment and treatment for refugee families is imperative.

Of the volunteer organisations involved in settling SHP entrants and supporting refugee settlement, the most significant role is played by

Statewide Resources Centre
150 Palmerston Street
Carlton Victoria 3053

t 03 9349 4122
f 03 9349 4967
eccv@eccv.org.au
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refugee community organisations. Much of this work is informal, often occurring out of standard working hours, and is not adequately recognised or supported. All too often the leaders of these organisations are overburdened and under-resourced, with many still establishing themselves in Australia while simultaneously working, studying and raising families. Further recognition of their involvement and assisting these organisations to find the resources they need will do much to improve settlement outcomes for clients of both HSS and SGP services.

4. Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater social and economic benefits for Australian society as a whole

A 2009 paper of the Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) stated, *"...that tensions generated by the arrival of new migrants, both for the receiving communities and the new arrivals, require interventions by government to moderate the potential conflicts and ensure economic, social, cultural and political integration."*

Belonging enables fulfilled participation in the Australian society through various ways such as employment, voluntary work and in cultural life. Fulfilled participation refers to the capacity of people to interact at their full potential and to be recognised and utilised for all their talents and skills. It also means being open to new and innovative ways of defining participation so that people from all cultures can offer new skills and insights to enrich our society

A strong multicultural school curriculum is urgently required to build a true sense of belonging for all Australians. Such a curriculum should have provision to teach major non-European languages based on the location of the school and its population context. More support is required for school staff to deal with the cultural diversity needs of children from specific backgrounds who face challenges in dealing with the Australian education model.

We regularly receive feedback from our members about the importance of schools being the crucial "sites of information" about identity for young people. There is evidence that large numbers of youth from CALD backgrounds feel that they do not belong. The eccv's 2009 paper entitled "**Kaleidoscopic Cultures**" concluded that *"...it is crucial that young people in our diverse society are supported with environments that encourage free exploration of their identity,"* as there is evidence that ethnic identity has evolved into a broader notion of cultural identity. Identity amongst our young is no longer confined to a set of values and behaviours linked with particular ethnicities or heritage or the past.

Australian needs to have a stronger commitment to multicultural education. Bilingualism should be supported as an educational base and Australian children should be supported to learn another language other than English, as well as English. In specific areas of the curriculum such as History, cultural diversity perspectives must have equal status as other sector perspectives such as gender.

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People participate in society through employment, voluntary work, caring duties, political engagement, training and education and the like. Policy recommendations in this area focus on ensuring equal opportunities for all Australians, including equality of “cultural circumstance.” The promotion of non-discriminatory practices, community relations at grass roots and local levels and culturally appropriate settlement and post settlement services will support positive outcomes in this area. English language services are particularly important to enable full participation by all Australians.

Eccv recognises that Australia leads the world in the provision of settlement services. What we advocate for is the needs of a diverse society beyond the immediate settlement period, which in Australia is considered to be 5 years.

Within the domain of participation is the role that government services play in supporting communities and individuals to engage with Australian society. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine in detail the policy issues for all services, but what we can say is that government services continue to plan and deliver services without fully considering the diversity of their client base.

Language is the key to empowered participation for all Australians. It is fundamental to culture. The complexity of language acquisition is underestimated in the current government programs. Our consultations indicate that the duration, the training modes and the lack of bi-lingual teachers mean that it is quite common for people to acquire few skills in English after these courses.

The Adult English Migrant (AMEP) program was reviewed in 2009 and we recommend that the outcomes of the review be implemented particularly in relation to people with limited literacy, women with children and people with mental and health barriers. It is important that the programs recognise that language acquisition also demands understanding a new and often alien culture and its beliefs and customs. The failure to include this dimension in the current courses creates low learning outcomes for some communities, particularly where cultural differences are most profound.

We believe that many people are marginalised when they do not know how to navigate Australian systems. This does not only apply to knowledge about government services and institutions, they also do not have knowledge about our workplace protocols and rights, private rental markets and the expectations of landlords or of rental agencies and the like. They need systems support to create positive initial relationships in all these sectors which is crucial to them being able to participate with confidence.

The eccv recognises that there is a national housing crisis in Australia. While it affects many Australians, those from culturally diverse backgrounds are further disadvantaged in already tight rental markets. In a report to the eccv recently our eight regional councils named

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eccv@eccv.org.au
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housing as one of the two key barriers to successful settlement in regional Victoria, the other being employment.

A fulfilled participation creates real contributions by all Australians. Contribution is the external manifestation of a successful multicultural agenda. The outcomes of an agenda that respects and gives equality to all Australians will create equal contributions in the public sphere. These contributions can be in business, arts, intercultural collaborations and in enhancing the language and cultural skills available in our society.

Art is often the key to cross cultural and inter cultural communication. What policy and other initiatives may labour long to achieve, art can succeed in doing more efficiently and with less confrontation. While we recognise the role of sports in dissolving cultural boundaries, arts have an equally important role in creating meaningful communication.

For many communities art is an important symbolic expression of their identity just as sport is for others. The Arts has been increasingly on the wane in terms of significance in Australian public policy. This leads to the potential loss of one of the most significant ways of achieving social cohesion in a non-confrontational way

Multiculturalism provides a space in the service delivery framework for ethno-specific organisations to develop and thrive by helping them build capacity, community infrastructure and redress the power imbalance in the negotiation around productive service delivery partnerships.

There are people in all communities who do not conform to cultural norms. For example young couples wanting to marry 'outside' of their culture or religion can be ostracised and become isolated as a result. This sort of 'ostracism' can extend to areas of stigmatisation such as mental health, disability, sexuality and the like.

National productive capacity

5. The role migration has played and contributes to building Australia's long term productive capacity

Eccv wants to emphasise that the contribution migrants have made to Australia should not be seen in solely economic terms. Migration has profoundly and positively changed Australia culturally and socially and this should be recognised and celebrated.

The question Australia should be asking is "to what extent do we have the institutional capacity and will to harness the benefits of migration and cultural diversity?"

Eccv notes that government campaigns promoting diversity continue to highlight aesthetic values such as food and entertainment. It needs to include debates about the economic values of diversity by adding concepts of new knowledge acquisition in key areas such as environment, work and lifestyle choices.

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The campaigns have to promote the message that engaging with diversity is an attitude that brings benefit both within cultures as well as in inter-cultural situations. In a globalised world, engaging with diversity has to be presented as a reality and not a choice.

6. The profile of skilled migration to Australia and the extent to which Australia is fully utilising the skills of migrants

Are we doing enough to ensure migrants with skills are able to have those skills recognised, upgraded where necessary, access training and up-skilling if their skills are out-dated, help to improve their English language proficiency and given access to the labour market?

There is also considerable evidence of large scale 'underemployment'. We have significant numbers of well qualified people in the labour market who are working at levels well below what their qualification would suppose.

Like language acquisition, digital literacy can be both a barrier and an enabler to participation. With increasing reliance of government services on digital technology, the ability of this technology to reach some sectors of Australian population is an issue. CALD Australians can face the following barriers with Digital Literacy:

Older CALD migrants who form 23% of the Australian population aged over 65 years have limited English language ability, limited digital literacy and limited access to digital technology due to financial constraints. We applaud programs such as the "Senior Surfers" program in Victoria that work to improve this access.

Refugee and humanitarian entrants have often not been exposed to digital technology. Many need to acquire skills in this area to find employment. Some skilled migrants may be limited in their English language skills and this would limit their ability to access and use Digital Technology.

The key issues in this area relate to support services (employment services), skills recognition and workplace discrimination. Eccv recognises that some important steps to address systemic inequities have been initiated, such as the provision of dedicated multicultural officers and culturally appropriate job services. But we also know that access to support when overseas qualified professionals are trying to have their qualifications recognised is limited. Even if applicants have their qualifications recognised, often potential employers still demand evidence of local experience before they will hire.

Migrants bring with them trades and skills which may be new or different to what is currently available in Australia. Eccv has heard strong representations from people about how their special skills were ignored and they were unable to break into the skilled labour market and were only successful in obtaining cleaning or other unskilled jobs.

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There are also examples of people encouraged to develop their traditional skills and start small businesses which flourished because of their exotic novelty value. Such businesses, on a small and large scale, can add great value to Australia.

There are already several measures in place to support and encourage workplace diversity. Eccv promotes that the next step should be taken aiming for "maximisation" of workplace diversity. This means that we do not simply create strategies to deal with the current reality of diverse workplaces, but that we will garner this to our advantage by focusing on the benefits of workplace diversity and how best to utilise this to add value to our business practices.

7. Potential government initiatives to better assist migrant communities establish business enterprises.

We know that 97% of all enterprises in Australia are small business and that approximately 30% of first generation migrants and business operators so clearly the ethnic diversity of Australian society is matched with an ethnic diversity of Australian small business.

The fact is many ethnic groups, in relative terms are more likely to be in small business than the Australian born. We know that like small business in general they value the importance of family in their small business enterprises. It was reported that in 50% of the ethnic business' surveyed in Sydney in 1996, between 75% and 100% of their staff were family members. They also tend to employ 'co-ethnics' so the greater the number of and success of ethnic small business in Australia, the greater will be the number of jobs created and the greater chance of reducing the high rates of unemployment among some ethnic groups. So initiatives to better assist migrant communities establish business enterprises will also have the effect of reducing unemployment and under-employment.

New initiatives should include programs that are easily accessible and provide some funding and business knowledge support to assist migrants establish business enterprises. By easily accessible we mean provided in a way that takes account of the likelihood of low levels of English proficiency and literacy skills of potential establishers of ethnic small business. These barriers cause a variety of problems including a lack of awareness of opportunities for training, difficulty in competing with others for assistance through the various government programs, reluctance to participate in mainstream 'classroom style' training, difficulty in establishing networks and difficulty in approaching financial institutions for loans.

What this demonstrates is that the existing system of support is perhaps too complex and not sufficient geared towards providing a pathway that works for migrants and should as a result be reviewed to make it less complex and more navigable for small business aspirants.

Another way for government to provide support and assistance is to work with the Ethnic Chambers of Commerce that already exist and

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support the establishment of more Ethnic Chambers of Commerce who then can assist their fellow migrants, especially those who are from their own countries of origin, to navigate the complex system of starting a new business enterprise in Australia.

While we appreciate that banks have commercial imperatives that will govern their lending practices, programs initiated by the Commonwealth which provide encouragement to banks and other lenders to support small businesses with low interest loans for start-ups should be considered.

At the same time, programs and policies to help ethnic small business formation including the development of low cost small business mentoring programs, help to establish small business cooperatives and programs that enhance the performance of ethnic small business including those who are engaged in export/import activities to improve Australia's long term productive capacity.

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