



SUBMISSION

Multicultural Framework Review

ETHNIC COMMUNITIES' COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

October 2023



About ECCV

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the peak body for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Victoria. ECCV works closely with more than 220 member organisations including ethnic associations, multicultural service providers, and regional ethnic communities' councils. ECCV has been advocating for human rights, freedom, respect, equality and dignity for migrant and refugee communities, and for a socially cohesive and inclusive Victorian community, since 1974. ECCV has a strong record of informing industry, practice and influencing Federal, State and Local governments to promote culturally responsive approaches and equitable access to services, antiracism and socially just policy.

Acknowledgments

ECCV would like to gratefully acknowledge our members and stakeholders for providing consultation feedback and sharing their insights and expertise. We would particularly like to acknowledge the input provided by:

- Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia
- Communities' Council on Ethnic Issues
- The Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture (Foundation House)
- Victorian Refugee Health Network
- Centre for Multicultural Youth
- Multicultural Arts Victoria

A note on language

The term 'people from migrant and refugee backgrounds' is used in this document to refer to people and communities who have entered Australia through a variety of pathways, including through humanitarian, family, and skilled migration pathways. ECCV uses this term to refer to people with backgrounds and ancestry that is not part of the dominant Anglo-Celtic Australian population. This term is inclusive of people seeking asylum in Australia, people on temporary visas, undocumented migrants, and people born in Australia.

Suggested citation

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ECCV acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to their Elders past and present.

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Executive Summary

ECCV congratulates the Australian Government and the Department of Home Affairs for establishing this Review of Australia's Multicultural Framework. We are grateful to have the opportunity to provide this submission outlining our views about changes to legislative and policy settings and the machinery of government that we believe should be enacted to foster a more cohesive and inclusive multicultural society and better serve the needs of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

For some time now, Multicultural Affairs has not had the necessary prominence in the machinery of Federal Government. Since its major operations were moved to the (now) Department of Home Affairs, and no longer represented by a Minister at the cabinet table, Multicultural Affairs has become sidelined and is longer central to government policy development and decision-making. We believe that this must be rectified by returning Multicultural Affairs to the centre of Government through the creation of an Office for Multicultural Australia and by giving legislative expression to the principles of multiculturalism through a Multicultural Act.

There are a number of other key changes and initiatives that the Federal Government could undertake to advance Australian multiculturalism. With support for new migrants requiring coordination between all tiers of government and across local government authorities, the Federal Government needs to lead intergovernmental cooperation and endorse a national standard for local government multicultural policy development and settlement support. The Federal Government must also take an active role in promoting anti-racism measures and messages, building on the current work by the Australian Human Rights Commission is complete.

Access and equity to services and information for people from all backgrounds is a key measure of the success of a multicultural society, but Australia's current Multicultural Access and Equity Policy is not being put to sufficient use. It must be updated, and government departments required to regularly report their progress in meeting its key commitments. The people in charge of providing services to diverse communities must also made more aware of their responsibilities regarding service access and equity, and held accountable for these.

Development of effective multicultural policy is currently hindered by a lack of available data about various indicators of health and wellbeing amongst people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and how they access services. The Government must rectify this to ensure that data about multicultural communities is more regularly and consistently captured and publicly reported. A more coordinated approach to research about issues affecting multicultural communities also requires the re-establishment of a dedicated research body.

Given the critical importance of employment and economic opportunity for people from migrant refugee backgrounds, it is essential that key barriers to migrant employment, particularly non-recognition of overseas skills and qualifications, are confronted. Employment services should provide more support for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds wishing to start their own businesses.

Lessons from the pandemic about the importance of health literacy and effective communication and engagement with diverse communities must be incorporated into all future government practice. Bicultural workers can be key to facilitating this and need to be more extensively supported.

The arts play an important role in improving community relations and allowing migrant and refugee communities to express their identities. This Review must consider how government funding and support for multicultural arts and events can be made more accessible.

Finally, this Review provides an excellent opportunity to consider how to overcome some of the barriers to citizenship faced by many migrants, particularly those who have arrived as refugees.

ECCV is a member of the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia (FECCA), and we join with them in supporting a bold, visionary national approach to improving Australia's Multicultural Framework. We hope that the recommendations in this submission will be carefully considered by the Review Panel. We look forward to working with the Federal Government and Office for Multicultural Australia, state Multicultural Affairs Ministers and Departments, FECCA, and other state and local ethnic communities' councils, to implement the findings of this Review and together create a stronger multicultural Australia.

Summary of Recommendations

For Australia's Multicultural Framework to meet the objectives of this Review, ECCV recommends that the Federal Government:

1. Create an Office for Multicultural Australia, with a Minister for Multicultural Affairs in Cabinet, to embed multiculturalism into all Government decision-making, service design and delivery.
2. Grant the Office for Multicultural Australia the authority and capacity to conduct research and lead commonwealth-state-local government dialogue with regards to multicultural policy.
3. Lead intergovernmental and community consultation on the introduction of a national Multicultural Act.
4. Endorse a national standard for local government multicultural policy development and settlement support.
5. Convene a national forum for local government to consolidate and progress local government multicultural policy development.
6. Rename *Harmony Day*, observed on 21 March, as *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*.
7. Lead and provide standards for future anti-racism strategies and campaigns with inter-governmental design and coordination.
8. Fund and develop an Intercultural Community Relations Strategy to facilitate better intercultural community relations.
9. Fund state ethnic communities' councils to develop and implement strategies that strengthen relationships with First Nations People and educate communities about our shared responsibilities.
10. Require major Government departments to report regularly and comprehensively on how they are meeting the six commitments of the Access and Equity Policy.
11. Undertake a thorough review by the Department of Home Affairs of the community consultation process to update the Access and Equity Policy to meet the current needs of diverse communities.
12. Include equitable outcomes for members of local migrant and refugee communities in performance indicators of senior executives of government and government-funded service providers.
13. Introduce a framework under which all recipients of public funding must be held accountable for adhering to diversity measures in all areas of funding distribution.

- 14.** With the ABS, consult with multicultural communities to determine the most appropriate definition of cultural and linguistic diversity and ensure this is applied consistently across departments.
- 15.** Mandate a minimum set of data for collection standards for all government and government-funded services providers.
- 16.** Consider strategies to ensure that consistent demographic data about service provision is more regularly and consistently captured and publicly reported.
- 17.** Consult with multicultural community organisations to develop guidelines for obtaining informed consent from service users about providing their personal information.
- 18.** Establish a new body to commission and/or undertake research to support multicultural policy development.
- 19.** Contract more Workforce Australia providers with the skills to assist unemployed people into self-employment.
- 20.** Facilitate conversations between employers, educational institutions and accreditation bodies to improve processes for recognition of overseas qualifications.
- 21.** Fund multicultural and ethno-specific community organisations to employ bicultural workers and provide local, community specific, health-based education initiatives.
- 22.** Fund the Department of Home Affairs to develop a campaign to raise awareness among multicultural community members of their right to access free interpreting, as well as the AUSIT Interpreters and Translators Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct.
- 23.** Update the current language services guidelines in consultation with language service providers, health providers and multicultural community organisations.
- 24.** Fund Government departments to proactively engage multicultural communities in the design and production of general and targeted communications that will reach all members of society.
- 25.** Fund multicultural peak councils to work with emergency agencies and services to improve their cultural responsiveness, engagement with multicultural communities during emergencies, and to increase their workforce cultural diversity.
- 26.** Establish a complementary review of barriers and enablers to citizenship for migrants and humanitarian entrants.

Background

Multiculturalism has been a central tenant of Australian national identity since the early 1970s. Australia was the second country to officially adopt multiculturalism as government policy in 1973, following on from Canada in 1971. This new philosophy was first signalled to the Australian public that year when Al Grassby, Minister for Immigration in the Whitlam Government, issued the reference paper *A multicultural society for the future*.

Multiculturalism as practice as well as philosophy was enhanced during the 1970s by the formation of ethnic communities' councils, starting with ECCV in 1974, at state and federal levels. These peak bodies enabled the multitude of local and state ethno-specific organisations to speak with a united voice on issues of multicultural policy and service delivery.

Crucially, multiculturalism in its early years was a bipartisan endeavour. There was no backtracking when the Coalition under Malcolm Fraser took power in 1975. The Fraser Government showed its commitment to multiculturalism with the introduction of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) in 1980, and the establishment of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs. The Galbally Report of 1978 made recommendations for the first official national multicultural policies, which the Fraser Government began to introduce the following year.

Further advances were made the Hawke/Keating Governments of the 1980s and 90s, starting with the introduction of an Access and Equity strategy in 1985. This required Federal Government departments to prepare Access and Equity Plans which would identify ways in which departmental practices could be changed to improve accessibility and equity. An even more significant advance occurred in 1987 with the creation of the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) as a Division in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. In 1989, OMA published the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, which formally set out Australia's first Multicultural Framework. This drove development of multicultural public policy for the next seven years. The 1980s and 1990s saw Australia's multicultural identity increasingly being celebrated.

This bipartisan support of multicultural policy ceased abruptly in 1996 with the election of the Coalition Government led by John Howard. The Howard Government abolished the OMA and the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR), and dissolved the National Language Policy. Surviving OMA functions were transferred to a much smaller Multicultural Affairs Branch in the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA).

Multicultural Affairs was further downgraded in 2017, when the Immigration Department itself was wound up, and Multicultural Affairs was absorbed into the new Department of Home Affairs (DHA), where it still sits today, on the periphery of Federal Government policy and strategy.

The Howard Government seemingly acknowledged the need for leadership in multicultural affairs and anti-racism, with its promise to respond to the rise of Hansonism prior to the 1996 election through the development of an anti-racism strategy. However, its planned response was watered down when opinion polling showed that the Australian public would not respond well to an anti-racism campaign, with its implication that racism was prevalent in Australian society. Instead, we saw the creation of Harmony Day on 21 March, a date known elsewhere as the UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Since 2007, successive Labor and Coalition governments have done little to rebuild multicultural policy from the damage done during the Howard years. The Federal Government has not yet resumed the leadership role that it once played. This submission will examine how the Federal Government could once again provide leadership and direction in multicultural affairs across all tiers of government, to communities, community organisations and service providers, and in the public arena.

Advancing Multicultural Australia

Re-centring Multicultural Affairs

Australia's greatest asset is our diversity. This must be acknowledged by placing multicultural policy at the heart of Federal Government decision-making. ECCV proposes that this should be achieved through the creation of a standalone Office for Multicultural Australia to coordinate a whole-of-Government approach and lead strategies to build a stronger, more inclusive nation. A whole-of-Government approach will embed consideration of the needs and perspectives of multicultural Australia into all Government decision-making, service design and delivery.

The Office of Multicultural Australia would provide the necessary leadership and influence, with a Minister for Multicultural Affairs in Cabinet. It would set clear whole-of-Government priorities, outline a process for evaluating outcomes, and recognise the strong capability of multicultural and ethno-specific organisations in supporting reforms across a range of portfolios. In its current home in the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), Multicultural Affairs is sidelined, peripheral, and exerts too little influence on government policy and decision-making. Likewise, the Australian Multicultural Council has little influence and is obscured in DHA.

DHA is a large department with oversight of many issues. Its core functions relate to rules, regulations and security, and therefore do not sit easily with the wellbeing and cultural focus that a multicultural agency should have. If the Federal Government is to enact policy to, as this Review's Terms of Reference put it, "meet the current and future needs of multicultural Australia at the Commonwealth level", then Multicultural Affairs must sit closer to the centre of Government decision-making.

Recommendation 1

Create an Office for Multicultural Australia, with a Minister for Multicultural Affairs in Cabinet, to embed multiculturalism into all Government decision-making, service design and delivery.

The Office for Multicultural Australia should have research capacity and executive authority, or at least some sort of legislative base for developing multicultural policy at the federal level. Poor engagement with multicultural communities during the pandemic, which is likely to have been a factor in the drastic inequalities in infection and fatality rates between migrants and the Australian-born, shows what can happen when effective leadership and coordination is lacking.¹

¹ News GP (July 2022). 'Shocking': Migrants more than twice as likely to die of COVID-19. <https://www1.racgp.org.au/news/gp/clinical/shocking-migrants-more-than-twice-as-likely-to-die>

The Office for Multicultural Australia must work effectively inter-governmentally, and lead commonwealth-state-local government dialogue with regards to multicultural policy development.

Recommendation 2

Grant the Office for Multicultural Australia the authority and capacity to conduct research and lead commonwealth-state-local government dialogue with regards to multicultural policy.

Multiculturalism and diversity are the foundation of who we are as a nation. It is time for Government to reaffirm its commitment to multiculturalism and diversity, show leadership and promote a vision for a progressive, inclusive Australia. The principles of multiculturalism should be enshrined in a new Multicultural Act. This could follow the example of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act 1988*, which enshrined in law the Canadian Government's commitment to promoting and maintaining a diverse, multicultural society.²

A National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, published by the Office of Multicultural Affairs in 1989, examined the possibility of introducing a national Multicultural Act. Some of the options it listed for inclusion were:

- *“a clear statement defining multiculturalism, both its ambit and limits, and articulating the principles of multiculturalism.*
- *acknowledgement and recognition of the special status and place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australian life.*
- *giving legislative force to the expanded policy requirements for Commonwealth departments and agencies to ensure access to and equity in the provision of programs and services to those Australians who face barriers of race, culture and language.”³*

Recommendation 3

Lead intergovernmental and community consultation on the introduction of a national Multicultural Act.

² Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, *Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1988*.

<https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-multiculturalism-act-1988#:~:text=The%20act%20sought%20to%20protect,pass%20a%20national%20multiculturalism%20law.>

³ Office of Multicultural Affairs (July 1989), *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia...Sharing Our Future*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

A Welcoming Society

An inclusive and welcoming multicultural society begins with a positive and supportive settlement experience for those making Australia their home. Historically, the Federal Government has played the lead role in promoting this, through the funding and resourcing of a variety of settlement services and related programs, a role currently played most prominently through the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) for refugees and certain other visa holders. However, HSP and related programs are now mostly delivered by the Department of Social Services, not DHA, and the government is no longer providing clear strategic direction on settlement support.

Local governments have therefore played an increasingly important role in supporting new migrants to have a positive and welcoming settlement experience. However, there are 537 local government authorities across the country, and they are largely autonomous entities when it comes to designing programs and delivering services. They shouldn't continue to be left in isolation to develop their own responses to migrant settlement support.

The problem is that neither the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), the national peak body for local governments, nor state peaks like the Municipal Association of Victoria, have the will or resources to systematically address issues arising from cultural diversity on a statewide or national basis. This can only happen with State and Federal intergovernmental leadership and facilitation. The Federal Government could take the lead in liaising with the ALGA about the provision of support to local governments, and the planning and coordination of support for newly arrived migrants and refugees.

Welcoming Cities is currently the only organisation with a national framework for cultural diversity in local municipalities across Australia. ECCV recommends that the Government either endorse this or provide a similar framework as a national standard. This should then be recommended to local government as the standard framework for providing the necessary social, cultural, economic support to migrants settling in their region.

Recommendation 4

Endorse a national standard for local government multicultural policy development and settlement support.

The Federal Government's absence from providing leadership in the multicultural and settlement spheres is also felt through a lack of engagement with people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and ethno-specific and multicultural community agencies about the needs of migrants in their local areas.

Meetings between State Offices of Home Affairs and community agencies used to be a regular occurrence, but appear to have fallen by the wayside in recent years. A return to this level of engagement by the Office for Multicultural Australia would be another positive step towards better planning and strategising in multicultural affairs.

Recommendation 5

Convene a national forum for local government to consolidate and progress local government multicultural policy development.

Anti-Racism and Social Cohesion

ECCV is concerned that the Federal Government not shown firm leadership in the ongoing battle against racism, vilification, intolerance and hate speech. While there is protection against racial discrimination, dating back to the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, the Federal Government has largely refrained from attempting to influence public attitudes towards matters of race and racism.

In response to pressure following the rise of Hansonism in the late 1990s, the Howard Government committed to developing an anti-racism strategy. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs developed a strategy, but the government, conducted market research that revealed public hostility to the notion of an anti-racism campaign. The government therefore changed direction., and established Harmony Day, to be celebrated on 21 March, and the Living in Harmony community education and grants program.

Harmony Day, although a worthwhile endeavour, is essentially toned-down version of what is known in the rest of the world as the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. It provides a feel-good message that avoids Australians having to take a frank look at the systemic racism that permeates much of our society. It is symptomatic of a country that still does not know how to have meaningful conversations about racism.

Recommendation 6

Rename *Harmony Day*, observed on 21 March, as *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*.

National campaigns against racism have been left to the Australian Human Rights Commission, which has been funded to run the *Racism. It Stops With Me* campaign. This is also a worthy campaign, and it is important that the Commission receives the necessary funds to complete its work in this area,

particularly in development of a National Anti-Racism Framework. However, ECCV believes that in future the Federal Government must take leadership of anti-racism and not continue to outsource it to bodies like the HRC.

There are examples of positive work being done on anti-racism at the state level. The Victorian Government in particular has taken an active role in confronting racism, including through funding initiatives such as ECCV's *All One Together* campaign.⁴ Future anti-racism strategies and campaigns should draw upon the best of the work from state level, with inter-governmental design and coordination, under standards provided and enforced by the Federal Government through the new Office of Multicultural Affairs (or equivalent).

Recommendation 7

Lead and provide standards for future anti-racism strategies and campaigns with inter-governmental design and coordination.

Anti-racism strategies must also develop responses to the rise of intercultural racism. A trend that has been widely observed over the past few years is the emergence of a divergence in the attitudes and experiences and antagonism between different groups, including between older established and newer migrant communities. For example, a significant proportion of the racism reported by African-Australian emanates from members of other migrant and refugee communities. It is important that conversations about racism acknowledge that individuals can be both victims and perpetrators of racism. Existing inter-faith initiatives provide examples of how the Government could develop a Community Relations Strategy to facilitate better intercultural community relations.

Recommendation 8

Develop an Intercultural Community Relations Strategy to facilitate better intercultural community relations.

It is important that in consultations with diverse communities, larger and more connected communities are not allowed to dominate conversations. The Government should consider how it consults with multicultural communities to ensure that it finds and listens to the voices of people that are currently rarely heard in consultations.

The foundations of a strong and inclusive multicultural Australia must include an acknowledgement and understanding amongst multicultural communities of the ongoing impacts of colonisation on First Nations People, and of the shared responsibility to work towards justice and reconciliation.

⁴ See <https://allonetogether.org.au/> for further information.

A new Multicultural Framework should feature education and public awareness strategies to improve understanding of the unique position of First Nations People in Australian society, of their role as Custodians of this land for 60,000 years, and of the particular barriers to full social and economic inclusion that they continue to face.

Recommendation 9

Fund state ethnic communities' councils to develop and implement strategies that strengthen relationships with First Nations People and educate communities about our shared responsibilities.

Access and Equity

A key feature of a successful multicultural society is that programs and services are accessible to all members of that society, meet the needs of a diverse population, and provide equity of outcomes across all population groups. Equitable access to information is equally important, as it underpins many aspects of an inclusive society, providing fair opportunities for health, education, social justice, economic activities and much more.

This Review needs to consider that the discrimination and vulnerability faced by multicultural communities and individuals is affected by more than language difficulties. Barriers to full inclusion in society can include cultural identity, age, gender, and religion, to name a few. The overlapping nature of these identity factors can lead into ongoing systemic discrimination and exclusion. Government policies and programs often conflate different communities and cultural groups into a CALD label, not addressing the real and relevant differences that exist within communities and making government programs and messages less effective, or at times harmful as they are not trusted. To promote enhanced service access and equity, the Hawke Government introduced an Access and Equity Policy in 1985. This required Federal Government departments to prepare Access and Equity Plans which would identify ways in which departmental practices would change to improve their accessibility and equity.⁵

Australia's current Multicultural Access and Equity Policy, dating from 2018, stems from this 1985 policy. It is a sound policy that broadly meets its purpose of defining the policies by which the Federal Government can "ensure that its programmes and services meet the needs of all Australians, whatever their cultural and linguistic backgrounds".⁶

⁵ Jakubowicz, A., Commentary on: Access and Equity, *Making multicultural Australia*.

<http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/library/media/Timeline-Commentary/id/119.Access-and-Equity>

⁶ Department of Home Affairs (2018), *The Multicultural Access and Equity Policy Guide: For Australian Government departments and agencies*. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/mca/PDFs/multicultural-access-equity-policy-guide.pdf>, p.1.

The issue with the Policy lies in how it is being used to assess and report on performance. It is intended for departments to self-assess, so there is little rigour in evaluating how they are performing, and little in the way enforcement. More significantly, the last reporting on the Policy took place in 2017, covering the 2013 to 2015 period. A Policy such as this has no value if it is not in active use. At the very least, the major government departments must be required to report comprehensively on how they are meeting the policy's six commitments on a regular basis.

Recommendation 10

Require major Government departments to report regularly and comprehensively on how they are meeting the six commitments of the Access and Equity Policy.

Recommendation 11

Undertake a thorough review by the Department of Home Affairs of the community consultation process to update the Access and Equity Policy to meet the current needs of diverse communities.

ECCV believes that the Prime Minister should endorse a revised Access and Equity Policy, to ensure that it is given appropriate attention by all departments. The Minister for Multicultural Affairs must be able to speak to departments with the backing of the Prime Minister about access and equity, and make clear what is expected of them.

ECCV also believes that the current Policy could be strengthened with more robust standards and guidance for collection of data and provision of language services. These are both referenced in the policy guide as important elements of access and equity, but without clear direction for providers of programs and services about their responsibilities in these areas. An updated Access and Equity Policy would assist in making service providers properly accountable for ensuring their services are equally accessible to all members of society. Services should be designed to meet the diverse needs of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, instead of relying on partnerships with Migrant Resource Centres and ethnic communities' councils. In an ideal world, Key Performance Indicators for senior executives would include equitable outcomes for members of local migrant and refugee communities.

Recommendation 12

Include equitable outcomes for members of local migrant and refugee communities in performance indicators of senior executives of government and government-funded service providers.

Role of the arts

The arts have been undervalued and under recognised as a vehicle for improving community relations and helping people settle, engage with the wider community and maintain their identity. People from migrant and refugee backgrounds express their cultures, beliefs, attitudes and hopes through the arts and culture. It is important therefore that the arts and creative industries reflect the nation’s cultural diversity. Migrant and refugee communities must be seen on our screens, in our literature, and across the arts, and represented in leadership roles in arts bodies.

Diversity Arts Australia’s (DARTS) *Shifting the Balance* Report highlights the discrepancies between the high rates of participation of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in the creative sector, and their low rates of representation, including amongst decision-makers⁷.

Australia has an obligation to support cultural diversity in the arts as a signatory to the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*. The arts and creative industries are well placed to be leaders in enacting the Human Rights Commission’s National Anti-Racism Framework through the creative industries. But there needs to be more than multicultural community festivals. Mainstream festivals should reflect the broad cultural diversity of Australian communities.

Many migrant and refugee communities, however, are unable to access government support. Complicated funding frameworks are often inaccessible to those not already connected and familiar with them. Funding must be provided in accordance with equity principles that challenge current structures that favour the powerful and well-connected, and recipients of public funding must be held accountable for adhering to diversity measures in all areas of funding distribution.

Recommendation 13

Introduce a framework under which all recipients of public funding must be held accountable for adhering to diversity measures in all areas of funding distribution.

Data

Collection of data related to multicultural communities has gone backwards in Australia since the disbandment of various bodies by the Howard Government, beginning in 1996. There is currently a major deficiency in availability of data, and inconsistency in data collection. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) measures “cultural and linguistic diversity” using three different criteria:

- Born overseas in a non-English speaking country
- Speaking a language other than English at home

⁷ Diversity Arts Australia (2019). *Shifting the Balance*. <https://diversityarts.org.au/app/uploads/Shifting-the-Balance-DARTS-small.pdf>

- Level of proficiency in English

However, these measures are not implemented consistently across departments, leaving them to determine for themselves how they will define and measure cultural diversity. This creates difficulties in making comparisons across different sectors and determining where there are gaps. It is time for the Federal Government to re-visit with the ABS how cultural and linguistic diversity is defined, and to mandate a minimum set of data collection standards for all government and government-funded service providers.

Recommendation 14

With the ABS, consult with multicultural communities to determine the most appropriate definition of cultural and linguistic diversity and ensure this is applied consistently across departments.

Recommendation 15

Mandate a minimum set of data for collection standards for all government and government-funded services providers.

There is also currently very little reporting of data related to cultural and linguistic diversity by DHA, and similar deficiencies from other departments in data about how programs and services are impacting people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Indeed, such is the current opaqueness regarding data about multiculturalism that it is often not clear when data is actually being collected, and if the current paucity of available data is primarily due to lack of collection or lack of reporting. Rectification of this situation should be a priority of this Review.

Without comprehensive collection and reporting of disaggregated data related to cultural and linguistic diversity, it is not possible to properly measure how well services are reaching multicultural communities. Consistent data collection and reporting is necessary to determine the extent to which there is equitable access in every field, from health to education to aged care, social security, employment services, etc. This has serious implications for the accountability of service providers.

Recommendation 16

Consider strategies to ensure that consistent demographic data about service provision is more regularly and consistently captured and publicly reported.

However, as much as consistent and accurate data capture and reporting is needed, it is equally important to ensure that it is captured in a sensitive and culturally appropriate manner that doesn't present another barrier to service access for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Collection processes can inhibit building trust with members of diverse communities, who may be hesitant to

provide personal information due to past experiences of discrimination or trauma, for cultural reasons, or due to an unwillingness to provide data before rapport has been built. Processes must be put in place to create an environment that is welcoming and builds trust. It is important for services to establish that they care for their customers before asking them for information. Another frustration that community members often report to ECCV is having to answer the same questions multiple times when they are referred from one service to another.

Service providers should be encouraged to develop an informed consent process, so that users understand why they're being asked to provide personal information. If consent is obtained in the right way, it is the experience of ECCV and members that people are generally willing to share personal information, and consent for it to be shared amongst service providers.

Recommendation 17

Consult with multicultural community organisations to develop guidelines for obtaining informed consent from service users about providing their personal information.

Research

Until its abolition in 1996, the Bureau of Immigration, Population and Multicultural Research (BIMPR) undertook important research to inform the development of multicultural policy. Effective policy must be based upon a thoroughly-researched evidence base. Today there is still plenty of research being done by various bodies, but there is no coordinating body or framework to drive and oversee this. Much of the evidence being gathered seems to not be put to any noticeable use.

The *Joint Parliamentary Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism* of 2013 made several recommendations for improved research and data collection, including a recommendation for:

*“the establishment of a government funded, independent collaborative institute for excellence in research into multicultural affairs with functions similar to that of the former Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research.”*⁸

A decade later, there been no progress on this front. It is time for the Federal Government to acknowledge the importance of evidence-based policy by creating a new body to commission and/or undertake research to support multicultural policy development.

⁸ House of Representatives Joint Standing Committee on Migration (March 2013), *Report of the Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism in Australia*, p.130.
https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=mig/multiculturalism/report.htm

Such a body would consult experts to identify priority areas and issues for research, and engage with local communities, the private sector and non-government organisations to undertake quantitative, and (especially) qualitative evidence-gathering data collection.

Recommendation 18

Establish a new body to commission and/or undertake research to support multicultural policy development.

Economic Opportunity

Vibrant multiculturalism strengthens the economic as well as social and cultural life of the nation. “Productive diversity” provides a domestic and international business edge. People from migrant and refugee backgrounds play a disproportionately large role in the small business sector in Australia. One third of small businesses in this country are run by migrants, and almost 30% of adult refugees will start a small business within 10 years of their arrival in Australia.⁹

However, Federal Government employment programs focus mostly on helping jobseekers to become salaried employees, rather than assisting jobseekers interested in running their own business. Workforce Australia should provide greater support to assist people into self-employment and access the New Enterprise Incentive Scheme.

Recommendation 19

Contract more Workforce Australia providers with the skills to assist unemployed people into self-employment.

Australia is in many ways failing to utilise the skills of migrants and refugees to fill workforce shortages. A 2021 report by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia found that nearly a quarter of permanent skilled migrants in Australia are working in a job beneath their skill level, costing the nation at least \$1.25 billion in foregone wages between 2013 and 2018.¹⁰

A consistent barrier reported to ECCV by our member organisations and individuals from migrant and refugee backgrounds has been non-recognition of their skills and qualifications from overseas. As a migrant country, it makes no business or commercial sense to allow people to enter Australia on skilled

⁹ Thrive Refugee Enterprise, ‘About Thrive’. <https://www.thriverefugeeenterprise.org.au/about-us/#section-focus-areas>

¹⁰ Committee for Economic Development of Australia (2021). *A Good Match: Optimising Australia’s Permanent Skilled Migration* p.5. <https://www.ceda.com.au/ResearchAndPolicies/Research/Population/A-good-match-Optimising-Australia-s-permanent-skil>

visas, but then make it impossible for them to work in their professional fields because their qualifications aren't recognised. Professional accreditation bodies make the final decisions on recognition of overseas qualifications. Although there are often sound reasons why qualifications from overseas cannot be automatically recognised as equivalent to those obtained in Australia, current processes are far too onerous and rigid.

It is time for the government to step in to facilitate conversations between employers, educational institutions and accreditation bodies about this issue. Australia should be moving faster towards a system of mutual recognition of skills and qualifications with overseas countries. In cases where it is determined that overseas qualifications aren't up to standard, there needs to be more support to access bridging courses. The Minister for Employment and Training should also be looking at how to streamline recognition processes and access to bridging courses.

Recommendation 20

Facilitate conversations between employers, educational institutions and accreditation bodies to improve processes for recognition of overseas qualifications.

The pandemic years demonstrated the crucial role that bicultural and bilingual workers play in supporting, educating, and providing services to multicultural communities. Bicultural and bilingual workers bring a depth of cultural knowledge and lived experience to the organisations and communities they work with. Their networks, cross-cultural skills and knowledge have been crucial to the delivery of pandemic response initiatives and play a key role in supporting migrant and refugee communities in areas such as health literacy, mental health support, and addressing family violence.

To build on existing work, the value of bilingual and bicultural workers must be better recognised. Funding for programs such as *Health in My Language*¹¹, an initiative of Melbourne's Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, is an important start. Ongoing investment is needed in similar programs nationwide to ensure that all members of multicultural communities can access information relevant to their health and wellbeing.

Recommendation 21

Fund multicultural and ethno-specific community organisations to employ bicultural workers and provide local, community specific, health-based education initiatives.

¹¹ Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, 'Health in My Language'. <https://www.mcwh.com.au/project/health-in-my-language/#:~:text=Health%20in%20My%20Language%20is,Bilingual%20Health%20Educators%20across%20Australia>.

Members of multicultural communities, particularly women, continue to be under-represented in government at both Commonwealth and State levels, and at leadership levels in the private sector.¹² Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies are increasingly ubiquitous, but often do not appreciate the different forms that leadership takes in diverse communities. DEI programs should be tailored to ensure that they are appropriate to the needs of different communities. There is also the potential for increased support for government, public and private sector organisations to expand provision of work experience programs, internships and scholarships for members of multicultural communities, in order to increase the diversity of their workforces beginning at entry level.

Health and emergency preparedness and communications

Access to quality translations of health information and professional interpreting services are key pillars for increasing health literacy and facilitating better engagement of migrant and refugee populations with the health system. Studies show that the use of professional interpreters decreases the risk of communication errors and improves health outcomes for people with limited English proficiency.

ECCV members have regularly expressed concern about low levels of awareness about the engagement of interpreters amongst some organisations. Staff at some hospitals and clinics appear unaware that they can access free interpreting. In Victoria at least, there is currently a major shortage of interpreters in the public health system with many hospitals unable to meet needs or fill vacancies in their language services departments. It has also been reported that GPs can also often be reluctant to use interpreters, and that there are limited numbers of interpreters available in certain language groups.

High levels of demand on the existing interpreter workforce increase risks leading to professional burnout for interpreters. Although interpreter services all report that they provide employee assistance and counselling for their workers, employees often report that they are unaware of these and do not access them. The Government needs to consider how to support interpreter wellbeing by promoting accessible employee assistance and counselling services.

It is also vital that Australians with limited English proficiency are made aware of their right to use professional interpreters, and of their importance in facilitating accurate communication in healthcare settings. An education campaign can help raise awareness about how to access interpreters, and the Code of Ethics by which interpreters are bound. This could include simple measures such as placing multilingual posters in healthcare and community centres. ECCV also believes that allied health service providers should be able to access free interpreting.

¹² Jakubowicz, A. (June 2023). 'Is it multiculturalism for all Australians or just some of them (us) (you)?'. <https://andrewjakubowicz.com/tag/multiculturalism/>

Many of the current issues facing translation and interpreting could be addressed through the provision of a new set of language services guidelines, to replace the current guidelines dating from 2019.

Recommendation 22

Fund the Department of Home Affairs to develop a campaign to raise awareness among multicultural community members of their right to access free interpreting, as well as the AUSIT Interpreters and Translators Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct.

Recommendation 23

Update the current language services guidelines in consultation with language service providers, health providers and multicultural community organisations.

ABS statistics show that levels of health literacy are on average lower for Australians born overseas than they are for the Australia-born population, with the lowest levels being for recent migrants and those with limited English proficiency.¹³ The pandemic highlighted the importance of health literacy as a key determinant of public health. Improvements in health literacy will enable community members to make better-informed decisions about issues affecting their health. This will lead to improved participation, access, and understanding of the Australian health system, and ultimately result in better health outcomes.

Most State and Territory Governments have recognised the importance of health literacy for migrant and refugee communities and commissioned various community health education projects. Prior to COVID-19, however, funding for such projects was generally short-term and not provided in the systematic manner necessary to increase health literacy in the long term. As mentioned in the previous section, the Federal Government should also continue to fund local health-based education initiatives.

In the initial stages of the pandemic, Governments that recognised the importance of communication with multicultural communities generally regarded it sufficient to translate their materials and place them on their websites. Only as the pandemic progressed, and data showed higher infection and fatality rates amongst overseas-born Australians, did it become clear that a collaborative and tailored approach to information provision and communication would be necessary.

Lessons must be learnt from the initial failures of engagement and communication, and the later successes, which were achieved by working with communities. The most effective outcomes were achieved when members of multicultural communities co-designed, delivered and disseminated information themselves. Government messaging and communications in all spheres, from health to settlement to emergency management, must incorporate these principles. The Government should seek

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, Australian Social Trends, cat.no. 4102.0, Canberra

to resource and fund future projects that are locally based, using the skills already in communities and developing their capacity to understand the health and other service systems.

ECCV examined the experiences of multicultural communities during the 2022 Victorian floods, issuing a joint report with the Neighbourhood Collective Australia and Regional Victorians of Colour.¹⁴ The report found that multicultural communities, particularly those who are newly arrived and those on temporary visas, were at far greater risk of harm during the 2022 floods, had high levels of fear and anxiety, and gained information about the floods in very different ways compared to the mainstream community. It also found that the emergency response was not always culturally responsive.

Lack of cultural diversity in the emergency services workforce means that they are not fully equipped to understand and include the needs of multicultural communities. They should be supported to review and adapt their recruitment, induction and retention processes. This could include measures such as specifying an ability to speak community languages as a key selection criteria in position descriptions, and advertising positions via multicultural community networks.

Explicit measures to increase and monitor cultural safety including for volunteers, must also be developed. Data on workforce cultural diversity should be regularly collected and reviewed. Emergency agencies and services must be supported to improve their cultural responsiveness by undertaking cultural responsiveness training tailored to the emergency management sector.

Recommendation 24

Fund Government departments to proactively engage multicultural communities in the design and production of general and targeted communications that will reach all members of society.

Recommendation 25

Fund multicultural peak councils to work with emergency agencies and services to improve their cultural responsiveness, engagement with multicultural communities during emergencies, and to increase their workforce cultural diversity.

¹⁴ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Neighbourhood Collective Australia and Regional Victorians of Colour (August 2023), *Multicultural Communities Experience of the 2022 Victorian Floods*. <https://eccv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Multicultural-Communities-Experience-of-the-2022-Victorian-Floods.pdf>

Citizenship

ECCV believes that this Review provides a timely opportunity for the Department of Home Affairs to review barriers and facilitators to obtaining citizenship. Supporting migrant and refugees to become citizens is an important factor in promoting inclusion and social cohesion. However, many migrants report facing barriers to citizenship that could be overcome by changes to relevant policy settings.

In particular, migrants who have entered Australia through the humanitarian program often find it difficult to provide the necessary documents to become citizens. Refugees often come from countries that do not provide official documents such as birth certificates as a matter of routine, and concerns for personal and family safety make it impossible to request these. Similarly, the requirement that applicants for citizenship provide overseas penal clearances or police checks is often impractical and even potentially dangerous. As Foundation House notes, DHA claims to understand these difficulties and to apply them flexibly, but this flexibility is often not in evidence to applicants, who are repeatedly requested to supply the required documents despite continual explanations of why this is not possible.

English language competency requirements for new citizens can also place an undue burden on refugees. Many refugees have experienced interrupted educations, and traumatic experiences may have impacted their language learning. Refugees may therefore not be literate in their first language, and thus at even greater disadvantage in acquiring necessary English skills. Literacy requirements place a particular burden on women and in particular mothers, as they are generally the main carers for their children, limiting their ability to attend English language classes.

Recommendation 26

Establish a complementary review of barriers and enablers to citizenship for migrants and humanitarian entrants.

Conclusion

This is a time of great opportunity for multiculturalism in Australia. This Review is an occasion to consider how to best move forward in advancing and strengthening our multicultural institutions and policy settings after a long period of stagnation. ECCV urges the Review Panel to be bold in making recommendations for institutional arrangements, legislative and policy settings that fulfill a progressive vision for Australia as an inclusive, vibrant and proud multicultural nation.

Multicultural policy has for the last few decades been hamstrung by its peripheral place in the machinery of Federal Government. Multicultural Affairs must be returned to the centre of Government through the creation of an Office for Multicultural Australia and the formulation of a new Multicultural Act. Cohesive multicultural policy also requires cooperation between the tiers of government, the development of national standards for local government multicultural policy development and settlement support, and renewed commitment and leadership in anti-racism.

Equitable access to services and information is central to a successful multicultural society, and this requires a fresh commitment to an updated Multicultural Access and Equity Policy, and greater accountability for government departments and service providers regarding access and equity. Multicultural policy must be underpinned by comprehensive collection and publication of relevant data and evidence. Data about multicultural communities must be more consistently captured and reported, and a dedicated multicultural research body created.

The Review must also consider barriers to employment and economic inclusion for migrant and refugee communities, particularly the non-recognition of overseas skills and qualifications. Lessons from the pandemic about effective communication and engagement with diverse communities must be incorporated into future government community engagement and service delivery. The crucial role played by the Arts in fostering community cohesion, cultural expression and reflecting our nation's multicultural identity must also be recognised and supported. Finally, ECCV recommends that the Review Panel consider solutions for overcoming the barriers to citizenship faced by many migrants.

ECCV looks forward to working with the Government, FECCA and other relevant bodies in implementing the findings of this Review and together creating a stronger multicultural Australia.



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