



Australian Government
Australian Multicultural Council



The Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism
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Australian Multicultural Council Submission – 10 May 2017

The Australian Multicultural Council (the Council) is pleased to take this opportunity to present a submission to the Select Committee inquiring into and reporting on ways of protecting and strengthening Australia's multiculturalism and social inclusion.

The Council is a ministerially-appointed body which provides advice to the Australian Government on multicultural affairs policy and programs, with a particular focus on:

- harnessing the economic and social benefits of Australia's culturally diverse population
- celebrating diversity, promoting social acceptance and fostering engagement with Australian values, identity and citizenship, within the framework of Australian law
- building stronger and more cohesive communities and addressing barriers to participation, including racism and discrimination
- promoting greater intercultural and interfaith understanding and dialogue, and
- empowering civil society through partnerships with the business sector and harnessing the experience of established communities in developing the capacity of newer communities.

With such a wide remit, the Council has opted to make more overarching comments rather than specifically address single items from the Select Committee's terms of reference.

The Council supports the Australian Government's new multicultural statement, *Multicultural Australia: united, strong, successful* which identifies priorities and strategic directions which can guide policies and programs for years to come. The ideas presented below are intended to give a menu of measures that could be utilised for practical implementation of this Statement.

Strengthening citizenship and integration requirements

In relation to the Government's announcement of 20 April 2017, the Council is broadly supportive of the principle of strengthening citizenship requirements to improve Australia's social and economic outcomes and national security.

It is important for Australia's long term social cohesion that aspiring citizens demonstrate their commitment to live in accordance with Australian values and a willingness to integrate into, and contribute to, the Australian community.

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We therefore support strengthening the Australian values statement, consistent with the shared values and shared rights and responsibilities already articulated in the multicultural statement.

While we intend to make more detailed comment as part of that separate consultation process being managed by the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, it is worth noting here that the development of clear guidelines around values, citizenship education and integration requirements will be essential.

The Council is also concerned to see that the new requirements and increased costs not lead to reduced take-up rates for Australian citizenship. This would create a growing pool of long-term permanent residents and potentially undermine the current high levels of social cohesion.

The Council also notes that successful integration depends on the efforts of the Australian community and government, as much as the migrant. A two-way integration and mutual obligation approach requires that government takes more responsibility to remove obstacles to integration, particularly as they relate to employment, English language acquisition and robust access and equity policies (canvassed separately in this submission).

Improve Access to Labour Markets for New Migrants

Skilled migrants should be seen as an economic success. They secure employment quickly, earn above average salaries and, given they do not gain access to welfare entitlements until two years after their arrival, are rarely a drain on the public purse. The outcomes are less positive however for secondary skilled migrants. They are usually spouses of the first category, and face barriers not experienced by the primary skilled migrants. They are usually highly skilled but may not have English language skills, or the ability to search for employment in Australia, noting that most of the support services available focus on refugees, and specifically exclude secondary skilled migrants.

Newly arrived migrants are initially most concerned about employment, settlement, and education for their children as a priority. However, for them (and for the Government) language learning must be prioritised, as it is the single, most important vehicle to ensure better settlement and integration outcomes.

For it to work well, language learning should be embedded in everyday life – for example, via workplace English language training, or training that is delivered locally, where communities are in situ. English classes should also be offered for a longer period of time, enabling people to catch up.

Additional assistance that focuses on access to labour markets should include: assistance to gain recognition of overseas skills; subsidised childcare; access to work placements or internships with businesses to gain work experience in the Australian environment; access to TAFE or university courses in the first two years of arrival without having to incur full course fees; and access to job search services during the first two years of settlement.

Monitor Labour Market Participation Outcomes

Labour market research indicates that there are significant barriers to equal employment opportunities that impact disproportionately on some culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, such as: employers and organisations that are unfamiliar with the work rights of migrants; Australian workplace culture and recruitment practices; the requirement for local experience; recognition of qualifications; and the cost of childcare (which is not unique to migrant families). Apart from individual redress available through anti-discrimination measures, there is no systemic approach to these issues.

Monitoring of employment patterns among the larger employers could help to address this situation. This, for example, could be achieved by enacting legislation to broaden the mandate of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) to include the monitoring of CALD employment statistics.

Currently WGEA has a good methodology for assessing large employers' gender equality status and provides incentives like the much sought after Employer of Choice for Gender Equality Awards. Having a Workplace Equality Agency with some focus on CALD peoples would provide an effective way of enhancing equality in the workplace for CALD Australians. Alternatively, such a role could be undertaken by a re-established Office of Multicultural Affairs, or by a statutory multicultural research organisation.

Develop a Communication Strategy

An intensive communication strategy is needed to return multiculturalism to the mainstream and advance social cohesion. Such a strategy should aim to inform the community about the benefits of migration and multiculturalism.

The communication strategy, as a priority, should target third generation Australians, with below average educational attainment living in regional areas, as research suggests that people with these characteristics are most likely to be opposed to diversity and immigration.

Enact a Multicultural Australia Act

States have had legislation for nearly 40 years that not only asserts the values of multiculturalism (equity, access, participation, engagement) but also mandates the principles' systematic application in public services. All Australian States, with the exception of Western Australia, currently have multicultural acts.

It would be timely to enact equivalent federal legislation, as an important plank of a reinvigorated public commitment to multiculturalism. In addition to a statement of the principles of multiculturalism, the Act could establish a multicultural office, and deal with the implementation of Access and Equity measures. The Council would also encourage the inclusion (in the Act) of measures to better monitor elements of Access and Equity implementation, which could be achieved by adopting a model similar to that used by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency to monitor gender equality in the workplace.

Move Multicultural Affairs into the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

The placement of multicultural affairs within the Department of Social Services (DSS) sends a wrong message to the community. It inappropriately links multiculturalism to social welfare, (although one advantage of this association is that DSS has a significant budget which may serve to support more programs and initiatives in this area).

However, a much better solution would be to align multicultural affairs with citizenship and integration in the Prime Minister's portfolio, with the Assistant Minister responsible reporting directly to the Prime Minister. This approach has been successfully tested in New South Wales.

Re-establish an Office of Multicultural Affairs

Multicultural affairs should be a distinct and unifying force in Australia. A re-established Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) would open up opportunities for furthering the multicultural agenda across a wide range of Australian Government policies and programs, and encourage better coordination of functions and greater sharing of knowledge and expertise.

The OMA could also be responsible for providing policy advice to the Prime Minister, enforcement of Access and Equity measures across the Australian Public Service, and for championing measures to advance equal access for CALD Australians to labour markets and education.

Fund Research into Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion

Research is a way to prove lies and to support truth. This holds no matter what the discipline. Research can give us information about: thoughts and opinions; attitudes; and culture. This then allows for informed, evidence-based policy and program decisions to be made, which in turn can change behaviours and effect social change.

Research into multiculturalism and social cohesion could be undertaken either by the establishment of a Multicultural Research Grants system (administered either by a re-established OMA or DSS) or by an independent research body, established along the lines of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, or the (former) Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research.

Areas of research could include: national identity and social cohesion; social integration, as measured by intermarriage for example; labour market access; participation in community or political life; and processes leading to the adoption of overseas qualifications for local labour market requirements.

Develop National Policy on Languages

While English is Australia's national language, and is also growing as an international means of communication, in our increasingly multi-lingual world more people speak two languages than one – and contact with speakers of other languages is rapidly growing.

Australia can build on its diverse linguistic and cultural environment. Migration has brought into Australia more than 150 additional languages which form a valuable base from which to forge the linguistic capabilities necessary for Australia to succeed in the 21st century.

A National Policy on Languages would assist with implementation of the Government's productivity agenda, by not only encouraging second and third generation migrants to maintain their language skill base but also introducing native English speakers to the transformative power associated with learning another language.

This would be particularly welcomed by community language schools, especially those run by the more established migrant communities.

Funding for Practical Community Cohesion Measures

Given that most Australians acquire citizenship not by conferral but simply at birth, any measures providing information or reminders about Australian values must encompass all Australians.

As noted in the report of the national consultation process – *Australian Citizenship – Your Right, Your Responsibility* – several Government reports and reviews have identified the importance of a stronger civics program in schools to encourage participation with, and pride in, both community and political life in Australia.

Adults too need access to materials and guidance to enhance their awareness of the accountabilities and privileges afforded them as citizens.

With citizenship being such an integral part of settlement, citizenship education should also be a fundamental part of the settlement services provided to new migrants. Programs should be developed (including online programs) to provide this information not only to the newly arrived but also the wider community.

Summary

Australia has always welcomed those who have travelled here to be a part of our wonderfully free and open society, to build better lives for themselves and their children and to contribute to this nation.

Multiculturalism remains one of the most important policy planks available for any Government keen to maintain and secure the social fabric of this country. Perceptions that it is no longer relevant to the broader Australian community (because it seems marginalised, serving only the needs of refugee communities) must be challenged and underpinned by reinvigorated commitment - not just by governments but by us all.

Yours sincerely

Dr Sev Ozdowski AM FAICD

Chair

12 May 2017