AMES Australia

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters – Terms of Reference

Response to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters | May 2024

Introduction

AMES Australia (AMES) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Terms of Reference for the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. AMES sees this inquiry as an important opportunity, as full electoral participation of all eligible culturally diverse community members upholds Australia's democracy, while civic participation builds social cohesion and a sense of belonging. Many multicultural community members both aspire to, and fully support, active participation and representation in Australia's electoral system.

AMES has more than 70 years' experience of providing programs and services for new arrivals to Australia and this response builds on an in-depth understanding of the evidence base of practice that supports settlement outcomes and participation in Australian society.

Specific to this inquiry into electoral matters, AMES has a long established relationship with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) which has resulted in activities jointly delivered and/or hosted including impartial information sessions for multicultural communities about the voting process, and in 2023 on The Voice Referendum. AMES also administers surveys and conducts focus group and forums to gain insights on diverse community perspectives on topics, such as the meaning of Australia Day, and attitudes towards citizenship.

In reviewing and responding to the Terms of Reference (ToR), AMES affirms each of the six inquiry ToR as relevant and appropriate to support the civics education, engagement, and participation of Australia's culturally diverse communities. AMES response has been informed by AMES Executive and staff representatives, many from multicultural backgrounds.

The voice of AMES multicultural clients and community members is referenced in this response with clear insight from their experience and settlement journey, that culturally diverse community members are motivated and eager to learn about, and participate in, Australia's democratic system. The following reflections represent views on electoral matters shared by multicultural communities:

- The importance of building trust in Australia's electoral and governance system.
- Providing information in/through spaces and services where culturally diverse communities are already engaged.
- Building skills to recognise and investigate mis/disinformation, which can support culturally diverse communities to better participate in the electoral system.

For migrants to Australia, voting provides a sense of belonging, agency and validation of their new citizenship.

For more information, please contact Catherine Scarth, Chief Executive Officer, AMES Australia ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

AMES Australia

Response to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters – Terms of Reference, May 2024

Term of Reference	Scope, issues, strategies for the inquiry to consider
ToR 1: **The effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for improvement.**	**AMES Australia brings to the attention of the inquiry the following matters.** ToR 1 seeks to establish contexts and opportunities within the broad education and community sectors to embed civics education. In responding, the following points are raised from the perspective of culturally diverse adults who are unfamiliar with Australia's electoral system, and may only experience educational opportunities as an adult e.g. arriving as adult migrants or refugees. **Formalised civics education** needs to be equitable and address gaps in, or limitations to, eligibility for culturally diverse adults as follows: • Humanitarian entrants engage with the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), which provides orientation information relevant to immediate needs. It includes topics related to Australian civic participation (fundamentals of Australia's history, citizenship, rights, laws, legal systems, and the roles of levels of government). • HSP clients typically hold visas that do not allow them the right to vote, and detailed information on electoral matters is not included. • Further, this information does not reach all new arrivals, as migrants who are not HSP clients (e.g. skilled and professional migrants) do not receive this orientation. **Methods and forums for formalised civics education** to improve equitable access for culturally diverse communities include: • Repeating or staging information on civics for HSP clients later in their settlement journey, to overcome potential overload from receiving all information in their initial settlement period. • Community Hubs Australia (CHA) offer information programs, such as citizenship information sessions, for families, particularly mothers, of school-aged children from diverse backgrounds. • Civics-related information programs are currently predominantly delivered at the time of upcoming elections and could be expanded to ongoing delivery to extend the reach to those not eligible through other means. • Citizenship preparation courses including information on civics for culturally diverse adults applying for Australian citizenship.

AMES Australia

Term of Reference	Scope, issues, strategies for the inquiry to consider
ToR 2: **The vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanisms to improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system.**	**AMES Australia brings to the attention of the inquiry the following matters.** ToR 2 seeks to address means of leveraging and sharing quality electoral information in informal spaces. There are a range of informal channels that culturally diverse communities access to **seek and receive information from a range of sources**: • Community sources via word of mouth, ethno-specific publications and radio, community and religious leaders and news from home countries. • Online sources including social media, WhatsApp groups and online searches. • More formalised sources of information include print newspapers, libraries, and political flyers received in mailboxes; however, these are often only available in English, meaning information is not accessible for those with little or no English proficiency. • HSP providers encourage clients to seek information directly from government websites, which will have first language options for some of the information, and community education resources (e.g. AEC website), and inform clients on how to navigate language options. This requires access to technology, a level of digital skill, and capacity to navigate online sites, which are known barriers for some multicultural and diverse community members. Diverse community members have advised that the following strategies may improve the quality of, and easy access to, information that meets the needs of culturally diverse community members: • Developing and promoting official websites/pages that provide language options other than English for culturally diverse communities and for service providers to refer to clients. • Building the capacity of community and religious leaders to be a conduit to provide culturally diverse communities with accurate and impartial information, or ways to access sources of information about democracy, electoral events, and voting. • Developing and publishing translated collateral, videos and audio clips, which can be shared by users via multiple media outlets, for example, social media, WhatsApp, ethnic or community radio and newspapers.
ToR 3: **The mechanisms available to assist voters in understanding the legitimacy of information about**	**AMES Australia brings to the attention of the inquiry the following matters.** ToR 3 seeks to address the complex and pervasive matter of the legitimacy, accuracy, and security of information related to electoral matters.

AMES Australia

Term of Reference	Scope, issues, strategies for the inquiry to consider
electoral matters; the impact of artificial intelligence, foreign interference, social media and mis- and disinformation; and how governments and the community can prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes.	**Foreign interference and mis/disinformation** is recognised as an impediment to participating in elections and the understanding this may influence electoral decision-making: • Disinformation tactics are known to particularly target newly arrived communities. For example, during the period of the Voice to Parliament referendum, culturally diverse communities reported receiving messages, including from offshore, communicating that a 'Yes' vote would threaten their visa status, or would result in losing their homes and land. **Targeted education programs** may assist culturally diverse community members to be alert to, and seek alternative information sources that identify and challenge mis/disinformation, including: • Embedding in English language education programs real life examples that build skills and confidence to recognise mis/disinformation, and to analyse information legitimacy. • Building digital literacy to alert users to AI generated information, signs of scams, and strategies to investigate information sources and manipulated content.
ToR 4: **Opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation.**	**AMES Australia brings to the attention of the inquiry the following matters.** ToR 4 seeks to address diversity in all forms – culturally and geographically – to identify opportunities to promote full electoral participation. **Culturally diverse communities** comprise individuals and groups of different backgrounds, demographics, arrival circumstances, and settling locations (e.g. metropolitan, regional, and remote). Communities arrive with a diverse range of experiences of governance systems and election processes, impacting on what information is culturally suitable and relevant for individuals and community cohorts, for example: • Migrants may have experiences with non-democratic governance systems. • People from refugee backgrounds may have never had a right to vote in their country of origin, and/or have lived in third countries or detention camps for extended periods of time without electoral participation rights. • Migrants may come from countries where voting is non-compulsory and may require education on why Australia's system is compulsory and consequences of non-participation. Therefore, for some migrants, voting in Australia may be their first experience participating in a free and influential election, or their first time participating at all. The following may support culturally diverse communities to access relevant information and promote full electoral participation:

AMES Australia

Term of Reference	Scope, issues, strategies for the inquiry to consider
	• **Building relationships with community leaders** to support and use the communication channels that work for their community members. • **Bringing the client voice and experience into the planning and development of resources and solutions -** for example, using community members to talk about their experience of electoral participation in the Australian context. • **Building trust in Australia's electoral and governance system** through consistent messaging: that electoral participation is a free choice and that every vote is influential. This is known to break down apprehension to participate in voting. • AMES continuously **connects culturally diverse community members with Australian authorities** e.g. Police by hosting information sessions and Services Australia informing on entitlements and obligations; to build trust, understanding and familiarity with authorities and systems. • **Activities specific to this inquiry** include tours of parliament and hosting ministerial visits. • **Providing information in spaces where community are already engaged**. Implementation of civics education needs to aim to relinquish the onus on culturally diverse communities to seek information, which can be difficult to navigate. For instance, information can be delivered in/through community locations, such as places of worship, multicultural centres and existing services which are already accessed by culturally diverse communities. This can include the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) which can deliver civics information contextualised through English learning. Leveraging community spaces and service providers where established trust and understanding of the needs of communities is a workable solution.
ToR 5: **Social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers.**	**AMES Australia brings to the attention of the inquiry the following matters.** ToR 5 seeks to deliver change that government can make to address barriers to electoral participation. These may be overt or subliminal; or inherent to the experiences of new arrival cohorts based on their pre-arrival experiences, or country of birth. There are known social and socio-economic barriers inhibiting electoral participation for culturally diverse community members including: • Complexity of the Australian federated voting system – local, state and federal tiers, jurisdictions and scope. • Limited understanding of how to vote, compounded by low English proficiency, creating a barrier to understanding information on how to vote or understanding ballot papers. • Low literacy, including in first language, poses a barrier to understanding information.

AMES Australia

Term of Reference	Scope, issues, strategies for the inquiry to consider
	• Confusion over the voting system and how to fill in ballot papers, especially for first-time voters, with community members reporting they preferred to be fined for not voting, or 'donkey voting', over potentially embarrassing themselves by voting incorrectly. • Limited knowledge on options for early voting (e.g. postal or early voting centres), where to vote, long lines and busy voting centres creating a negative experience, especially for parents with children. **Addressing the barriers to electoral participation** may include: • **Making available in-language information, and bi-lingual volunteers and booth operators**, especially at voting locations that have significant linguistically diverse populations. • Reducing anxiety and **supporting linguistically diverse communities to understand how to vote will require ongoing support.** Having voted once does not assure a successful voting experience going forward – in part due to complexity of the voting settings, and also the often significant time lag between voting events. • **Employing community members to provide first language support for voters** prior to the voting time frame. Using an 'Ambassador or Champion' model has been successful in other sensitive settings e.g. accessing NDIS and Aged Care services information. • Informing community members ahead of election dates about which polling locations will have **language support available**. • Providing information about where to vote, how to access voting centres (via a variety of transport means) and communicating options for voting early to avoid queues and accommodate schedules.
ToR 6: **Potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation.**	**AMES Australia brings to the attention of the inquiry the following matters.** ToR 6 seeks to identify structures that support full electoral participation. Suggestions have been included in the previous responses to ToR 1-5 that apply to culturally diverse adults in navigating and engaging with the Australia electoral system. In summary, working with established and trusted community groups and members; providing place-based, first language information; engaging and employing a culturally diverse workforce; simplifying the voting messaging to build confidence for inexperienced voters; and recognising the breadth of learning that is required of new arrivals – many with English levels that limit their community participation in the early phase of settlement – is a sound starting point to progress to full electoral participation.