



The Benevolent Society Social Issues Paper 11

Cultural and ethnic diversity

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world. Over the past three decades, this diversity has been successfully managed through policies and programs which promote multiculturalism. Some migrants and refugees, however, still face barriers in accessing services, finding a place to live, getting a job and dealing with discrimination and prejudice. If we are to continue to build strong and socially inclusive communities, it is vital that people of all backgrounds have the support they need to build positive and productive lives.

Why this is important

Australia is remarkable for its diversity. The 21 million people who live here originate from more than 200 countries and almost half of all Australians were either born overseas or had a parent born in another country¹.

The nation is also home to the oldest continuing cultures in human history, which date back an estimated 50,000 years. Cultural and linguistic diversity has been a part of the Australian landscape since pre-colonisation times, when distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations spoke around 700 different languages².

This diversity has been broadened further by the arrival of migrants from across the world, starting with the establishment of British colonies in 1788, prospectors seeking their fortunes in the gold rush of the mid-1800s and the large-scale arrival of Europeans following the Second World War. When the 'White Australia' policy was abolished in 1973, the country received a new wave of migration, especially from Asia.

The Australian Government, as a signatory to the United Nation's Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, also has an obligation to provide protection to people fleeing war and persecution in their home country. Around 13,000 places are available each year under the Government's Humanitarian Program, with most refugees today arriving from Africa, the Middle East and Asia³.

Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity is a major source of social and economic wealth, helping to build strong and productive links with many countries around the world and building a greater understanding of different cultures.

Since the mid-1970s Australia has successfully managed this growing diversity through a government policy of multiculturalism, which aims to promote understanding, respect and equal opportunities for Australians of all backgrounds.

In addition, legislation – at the national level and in each state and territory – provides protection for people who experience discrimination and vilification on the basis of their race, colour and ethnic origin.

While the majority of migrants and refugees who arrive in Australia are able to build positive lives, some experience significant and ongoing barriers which limit their social and economic opportunities.

These barriers can be the result of language difficulties, services that are not culturally appropriate or instances of racism or discrimination. The loss of important relationships with family and friends in home countries can also compound feelings of social isolation.

Long term residents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can also encounter difficulties, even though they may have lived in Australia for many years. Limited or deteriorating English language skills can prevent some from participating fully in the community or from receiving the health and welfare services they need, placing them at particular risk of isolation, depression and poor health outcomes.

- **Housing:** The current severe shortage of private rental and community housing, coupled with high rents, means newly-arrived migrants and refugees have particular difficulties finding secure, affordable and appropriate accommodation. This can make the process of settlement difficult, with significant impacts on education, training and employment. Some people also experience discrimination when looking for housing on the private rental market⁴.
- **Public transport:** Affordable and accessible public transport is vital to help people get to school and work, do the shopping and take part in sporting, cultural or social activities. Newly-arrived migrants and refugees in particular rely heavily on public transport and can be particularly disadvantaged if they live in areas with poor public transport services. The high cost of public transport can also influence choices about where and how often to travel.
- **Employment:** A lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, discrimination by employers and problems accessing training and education programs often means migrants and refugees are not able to fully participate in the workforce. Women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, especially in negotiating terms and conditions of employment⁵. Parents who wish to take part in employment training, English language or other necessary courses require inexpensive and culturally appropriate child care, which is difficult to find⁶.
- **Health and wellbeing:** People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly those living in rural and regional areas, often have difficulty accessing health services – general practice, specialist care and mental health – that effectively meet their needs. Some refugees also require specialist counselling and support to deal with the effects of torture and trauma. Ethno-specific services

tend to be restricted in their areas of operation and access to interpreter services patchy.

- **Access to services:** Newly-arrived migrants and refugees can experience confusion about the government services that are available and difficulty accessing those services. As a result, some may not receive the support they need or the entitlements that are available to them.
- **Discrimination and social exclusion:** Some migrant and refugee groups have experienced significant discrimination and vilification in recent years. Members of Australia's Arab and Muslim communities have been physically accosted and verbally abused in response to terrorist incidents in other countries⁷. Experiences such as these can compound feelings of social isolation and increase barriers to employment, education and accessing services.
- **Ageing:** Many older migrants and refugees find Australia's health and aged care systems difficult to understand. With less financial resources to draw on in their older years than other Australians⁸, they are more likely to live in their homes for longer and rely on family and community support⁹. This can make it more difficult for them to access care when they require it. Many migrants and refugees tend to revert to their first language as they age¹⁰, which can create additional barriers in accessing essential health services.

What should be done?

This coming century will be marked by even greater levels of migration and movement between countries, as well as people fleeing conflict and the impact of climate change on their homelands. Many of these migrants and refugees will seek settlement in Australia.

The Benevolent Society recognises that promoting a sense of belonging – or social inclusion – is critically important in helping individuals participate in education, employment and community life.

To ensure that all people feel they belong and can contribute to Australia, we need to embrace cultural diversity as a defining characteristic of our identity.

It is time to reinvigorate our understanding of multiculturalism – to emphasise its social and economic benefits for all Australians and to break the cycle of fear and prejudice that lies at the heart of discrimination and social conflict.

The Benevolent Society supports a renewed approach to multiculturalism, based on a solid human rights foundation, which recognises the following key principles:

- freedom of all Australians to practice their culture and religion
- equal access and equal opportunity, and
- the responsibility of all Australians to commit to the democratic system and respect the rights of others¹¹.

A re-commitment to multiculturalism should be supported by a government focus on addressing the practical barriers that migrants and refugees face, especially during settlement.

Government services need to be more accessible so migrants and refugees can get the assistance they need and additional investment is needed in English language programs.

Settlement services need to be flexible to address the specific needs of new and emerging communities, as well as taking into account mental health issues, social isolation and family and community support.

Consideration should also be given to removing unnecessary barriers to the recognition of overseas professional qualifications.

Addressing the growing crisis in housing is another crucial area of policy reform. Services that promote social and workforce participation, such as public transport and childcare, should be accessible, affordable and equitable.

With Australia's migrant community ageing more rapidly than the broader community, there is a critical need to develop accessible, flexible and integrated health and care services that meet the needs of older people from a range of backgrounds and help them maintain important community ties.

While Australian laws provide protection against many forms of racial discrimination and vilification, legislation alone cannot address underlying social tensions. Community-based education is a necessary tool to build greater understanding of different cultures and promote social cohesion.

We support the goals of the Australian Government's 'Diverse Australia Program', which provides funding to community initiatives that address issues of cultural, racial and religious intolerance.

The Benevolent Society will continue to address the impact of discrimination on the communities with which we work and develop practical strategies to promote social inclusion.

It is a central focus of our 'Bridging the Gap' project, which aims to address poverty, social exclusion and race-related discrimination in Greenacre, in Sydney's south-west.

'Bridging the Gap' will work in partnership with the community over a ten-year period to develop and implement grass roots initiatives that address their specific needs and aspirations.

The Benevolent Society understands that governments, non-government organisations, communities and individuals all have a role to play in building positive relationships between communities of diverse backgrounds and promoting values of respect and understanding.

Working together, we can all help create a fairer, more inclusive society in which everyone can participate.

The face of diversity in Australia

- Australians come from over 200 different countries of birth – almost half were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas¹²
- Indigenous Australians make up 2.5% of the population – around 517,000 people – a figure that has increased by 11% since 2001¹³
- Since 1945, more than 6.8 million people have come to Australia as new settlers, including more than 900,000 migrants since 2000¹⁴
- Australians speak over 200 languages, including around 50 Indigenous languages¹⁵
- About 16% of Australians speak a language other than English, the most popular being Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic and Mandarin¹⁶
- As part of its Humanitarian Program, Australia currently accepts around 13,000 refugees each year, with equal numbers drawn from Asia, Africa and the Middle East¹⁷
- By 2011 almost one quarter of all Australians aged over 65 – around one million people – will be from a culturally and linguistically diverse background¹⁸.

Indigenous Australians

The Benevolent Society has developed long-standing relationships with many Indigenous communities through our work in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

Our issues paper on 'Social and economic inclusion of Indigenous people' explains the foundations of our relationship with Indigenous Australians and how we seek to support individuals, families and communities.

Endnotes

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4. Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia, *Empowerment and Inclusion Policy Statement*, 2007
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. Australian Human Rights Commission, *Isma – National Consultations on Eliminating Prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*, June 2004
8. Gibson D, *The New Picture of Ageing*, speech to HACC National Forum, February 2008
9. Messimeri-Kianidis V, *A Mosaic of Culturally Appropriate Responses for Australian Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Background Elderly People*, speech to Cultural Diversity in Ageing National Conference, 2007
10. Ibid
11. Australian Human Rights Commission, *Multiculturalism: A Position Paper by the Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner*, August 2007
12. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008)
13. Australian Human Rights Commission (2008)
14. Ibid
15. Racism, No Way, *Australia's Cultural Diversity – Fact Sheet*, www.racismnoway.com.au
16. Ibid
17. Australian Human Rights Commission (2008)
18. Messimeri-Kianidis (2007)

Other sources of information

Calma T, *Social inclusion for new and emerging communities*, speech to Social Inclusion for New and Emerging Communities Conference, June 2008

Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia, *A New Australian Multicultural Agenda; FECCA Policy Statement*, 2008

Productivity Commission, *Trends in Aged Care Services: Some Implications*, September 2008

Refugee Council of Australia, *Response to Australian Government discussion paper: 'Measures to improve settlement outcomes for humanitarian entrants'*, November 2006

Social Issues Papers

The Benevolent Society works with vulnerable individuals, families and communities who face a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. Our Social Issues Agenda identifies 12 broad issues that are related to social and economic inclusion, and our series of issues papers explores these challenges and some potential solutions. To read the full series of social issues papers go to www.bensoc.org.au

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