Supporting People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds (CLDB) to be Part of Australian Society

Migration, Citizenship and Cultural Relations
Policy Statement 2007
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About FECCA

- FECCA is the national peak body representing and advocating for culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Our role is to advise, advocate, and promote issues on behalf of our constituency to government, business and the broader community.

- FECCA promotes Australian multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice, community participation and the rejection of discrimination so as to build a productive, culturally rich Australian society.

- FECCA’s policies are designed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion, and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

Recognising the Impact of Migration, Citizenship and Cultural Relations on Australian Society

Immigration

- FECCA commends the significant levels of immigration to Australia with 143,000 people coming as migrants in 2006 and 14,000 people arriving as humanitarian entrants. Since the second World War 6.5 million migrants have entered Australia enriching our economy and culture.

- Immigration provides many economic and social benefits to Australia. With our ageing population and declining birth rates a properly managed immigration program is critical to on-going economic prosperity in Australia. Migrants from non-English speaking countries make up 15% of the Australian workforce. Our culturally and linguistically diverse workforce substantially increases Australia’s competitiveness in a global environment and facilitates the delivery of responsive and vital public services to Australians domestically.
FECCA is concerned at the increasing dominance of the skilled migration scheme at the expense of the humanitarian and family reunions streams, particular with the lack of substantial research around whether skilled migrants are working in their skill areas. Temporary skilled migrants are playing an increasingly important role in filling Australian workforce shortages. In 2005-2006, 39530 temporary business visas were granted – up from 27350 in 2004-2005. Australia's immigration program will continue to play a vital role in responding to workforce shortages as our population ages.

Currently, adult temporary protection visa holders are unable to access English language training under the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). This has the potential to create many long-term barriers to citizenship if they are eventually accepted as permanent residents, and then wish to consider becoming citizens.

There are now 20.8 million people of concern to the United National High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Australia has a vital role to play in resettling refugees displaced by civil unrest and war.

Family reunion is important for successful settlement. Family reunion rates have fallen since 1996 with increasing emphasis on skilled migration. From 1997-98, the Family Stream’s overall share of the Migration Program has fallen from 47 to 35 percent. People on temporary protection visas are particularly disadvantaged in being able to access the family reunion program.

**Citizenship**

- In 2005-06, 103 350 people from over 175 different countries were conferred Australian citizenship. Over 3.5 million people have become citizens since Australian Citizenship was introduced in 1949.

- Becoming a citizen provides a gateway to full participation in the life of the Australian community. The rights and responsibilities of citizenship include:
  - The right to access government services, free of any form of discrimination irrespective of your country of birth, language, culture, race or religion.
  - The right to vote.
- The right to stand for parliament or to seek public office.
- Work in the Australian public service.
- Serve in the armed forces.
- Apply for an Australian passport.
- Seeking assistance from Australian diplomatic representatives overseas.
- Freedom from deportation.

Citizenship is a symbol of acceptance into the Australian community. In the future, people wishing to apply for Australian citizenship will need to successfully complete a test of their knowledge of Australia, understanding of citizenship, and knowledge of the English language. The current proposal to link citizenship and English language skills will potentially disadvantage and exclude some people who have much to offer Australian society, particularly:

- New migrants working long hours to support their families who cannot access English classes during working hours, and are ineligible for social welfare payments.
- Parents with young children or carers of other family members, who cannot access classes unless others can pick up their caring responsibilities.
- Refugees who have experienced torture, trauma and/or long periods of displacement due to war or civil unrest. For many, post traumatic stress makes learning another language very challenging, requiring an extended time period and flexible delivery of English language programs.
- People who have experienced a very disrupted education in their country of origin, are illiterate in their own language, or who speak a language which is an oral language only.
- Older people.
- People living with disabilities that making learning another language challenging.
- People coming from countries of origin where English is not spoken or taught.
FECCA is concerned that these changes to citizenship qualification are unnecessary, exclusionary rather than inclusive, and have the potential to discriminate against people from non-English speaking backgrounds. For example, it is considered that English language testing would naturally favour migrants from English speaking countries or countries in which English is widely used including North America, Western Europe and South East Asia. This may result in migrants from outside these areas (such as South America, the Middle East and parts of Africa) being naturally disadvantaged. The inevitable ease with which migrants from traditionally English speaking backgrounds would pass English language testing may lead to polarization and negative stereotyping of individuals from communities without English speaking backgrounds as it would take them longer to acquire the skills to pass.

FECCA does not believe that there is clear evidence that a formal testing process will further raise the regard that people have for citizenship and not have unintended adverse outcomes. FECCA does not believe that English language testing should be linked to citizenship. In addition, FECCA is concerned about the formal citizenship test including:

- The potential for the test to be discriminatory and to act as a disincentive towards applying for citizenship,
- Concerns about how the test may differentially impact on new and emerging communities,
- Community members fear of the consequences of failing the test,
- The potential barriers that may be created through people having to pay to take the test, and
- How the test may impact on Australia’s national interest and reputation internationally.

Cultural Relations

- The current Australian policy framework United in Diversity (policy directions 2003 – 2006) states that the key to the success of Australian multiculturalism is inclusiveness, recognising the benefits of our diversity, and that “all Australians have the right to be active and equal participants in Australian society, free to live their lives and maintain their cultural traditions.”
• Recently, there has been a stronger political emphasis on “integration” rather than multiculturalism\textsuperscript{vi}. There is a level of community concern about what changes in political rhetoric might be signaling, particularly given the pending release of Australia’s next multicultural policy.

• In 2006, the Federal Government proposed that people on temporary visas seeking a long term stay in Australia would need to pledge their respect for Australian values and to abide by Australian laws. FECCA believes that Australian values are fundamentals already enshrined in law. Values such as respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, equality of men and women, freedom of religion, commitment to the rule of law, Parliamentary democracy, mutual respect, fair play, and compassion for those in need\textsuperscript{xvii} are not unique to Australia, but are universal values that build cohesive communities and which are shared by many cultures.

• Today, discrimination and racism are on the increase in Australia. People who have distinct physical characteristics (for example, women wearing hijab, people from countries of Africa) are experiencing increasing incidents of racism and discrimination\textsuperscript{xviii}. Negative media focus and stereotyping is having a strong negative impact on communities, with people feeling increasingly marginalised and vulnerable.

• Access to responsive public services and equitable outcomes for people from CLDB are still not being achieved, with particularly poor outcomes for people who do not have good functional English language skills (including older people from CLDB and newly arrived migrants and humanitarian entrants); people who are “physically different” in appearance (for example, people who wear distinctive clothing); people from CLDB with disabilities; people from new and emerging communities; and people with complex needs\textsuperscript{xix}.

• Many new migrants are unable to secure rewarding and purposeful employment. 45% of skilled Australian sponsored migrants are unable to find employment for the first three months after arrival and 21% are still unemployed six months after arrival\textsuperscript{xx}. Recognition of overseas qualifications continues to limit Australia’s ability to effectively utilize the benefits of our culturally and linguistically diverse workforce.

• Policies that promote fairness, inclusion and value our cultural and linguistic diversity are integral to building a cohesive, welcoming and safe community for all Australians.
FECCA’s Position on Immigration, Citizenship and Cultural Relations Policy and Programs

FECCA encourages Federal, State and Local Government to:

- Demonstrate a strong commitment and leadership and to drive positive intercultural relations, social justice and an inclusive society that values all Australians, whatever their cultural, linguistic or faith backgrounds.
- Categorically reject the use of issues of race, religion and ethnicity for political purposes.
- Continue the formal process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, which began in 1991 with the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. Reconciliation seeks “to provide a collaborative, lifelong learning space for Indigenous history, culture and society and to support efforts to deal with injustices and disadvantages”xxi.

FECCA believes that:

- Increasing immigration should be one part of a holistic response to Australia’s ageing population, skills shortages and workforce demands and needs.
- A substantial part of Australia’s immigration intake must be devoted to family reunion and reflect Australia’s commitment to resettling refugees under our humanitarian program.
- Australian multiculturalism has been a very successful policy approach and has been instrumental in building a strong, cohesive, inclusive community. FECCA members are concerned that some policy directions associated with ‘integration’ instead, with the introduction of an English language test and “values” test for new citizens, may serve to isolate certain communities and may be used by some elements to create disunity.
- Citizenship is highly valued amongst immigrant groups particularly amongst refugees. FECCA is concerned that the introduction of a citizenship test and an extension of the qualification period from 2 to 4 years is discriminatory and will limit access to basic citizenship rights including voting, public service employment and freedom of movement.

FECCA fact sheet -citizenship and intercultural relations

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FECCA’s Recommendations for the Formulation of a Responsible and Effective Citizenship and Cultural Relations Policy

Policy Objectives

FECCA advocates the following policy objectives:

- Increase the current levels of immigration to address concerns and needs relating to Australia’s ageing populace, skills shortage and workforce demands.

- Enshrine a non discriminatory immigration policy that continues to be balanced and does not select on the grounds of ethnicity or country of origin.

- Increase the current intake of refugees under the offshore Humanitarian Program, and greater flexibility regarding acceptance of refugees, through positive Government programs and initiatives.

- Ensure access to effective orientation and settlement services to build understanding of life in Australia, and to provide bridging programs to encourage migrants to effective participation in the whole life of the community, but not at the expense of individual needs and circumstances.

- Ensure effective sanctions for media and media entities that engage in negative stereotyping and marginalisation of particular sections of the community.

- Continuing and strengthening the public policy of multiculturalism, which embodies “an ethic of acceptance of and respect for cultural diversity, community harmony and inclusion.”
Ensuring Effective Immigration, Citizenship and Cultural Relations

FECCA believes leadership that promotes the positive value of our diversity and the opportunities that it creates for our whole community has a positive impact on Australian society. Other actions that would positively address immigration, citizenship and intercultural relations affecting Australians from CLDB and the Australian society include:

- Recognising that family reunion programs hasten settlement and contribute to Australia’s economic wealth.

- Reconsidering changes to citizenship requirements so that English language testing is not linked to citizenship. This should include:
  - Exemptions for people who are elderly or disabled, or who have lived a life withdrawn from English language interaction, so they can still successfully apply for citizenship.xxiii
  - Allowing refugees and humanitarian entrants from non-English speaking backgrounds the option of attending classes on citizenship rather than sitting a test in order to pass their formal citizenship requirements.

- Restore the citizenship waiting period to two years, to prevent discrimination and encourage the uptake of Australian citizenship.

- Citizenship testing delivered in different formats and settings, including in an oral only format, to meet a variety of different needs. And limiting testing to:
  - Practical aspects of Australian life that will benefit all new citizens.
  - Questions that existing Australian citizens would have a reasonable chance of answering correctlyxxiv.

- Accessible, adequately funded and responsive public services that effectively meet the needs of all Australians, whatever their cultural, linguistic or faith background. This should include:
  - Continuing the Adult Migrant English Program and further enhancing it and other English language programs such as the English as a second language, Workplace English Language and Literacy, and Language Literacy and Numeracy, as well as the broader Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO)xxv.
Reviewing the 510 hours of tuition provided under the AMEPxxxvi.

More research and consultation about how to boost the learning of English among CLDB Australiansxxvii

- Strategies and programs that reduce barriers to a timely and fair process for the recognition of oversees qualifications and to addressing unacceptably high levels of unemployment and under-employment in CLDB communities, perhaps through scholarships or affirmative action programs.

Sources

This policy has been formulated using feedback, comment, information, consultation and advice from the following:

1. FECCA’s members and their networks across Australia
2. Service Providers, case workers, healthcare professionals and workers, volunteers
3. Federal, State and Local Government agencies
4. Advocacy bodies, peak bodies and professional organisations
5. Community leaders and members
6. Individual comment and experience

ENDNOTES

i Department of Immigration and Citizenship – Immigration statistics

ii Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Diversity Australia. Diversity works!.


vii Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Fact Sheets. Overview of the family stream.

FECCA fact sheet –citizenship and intercultural relations

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viii Department of Immigration and Citizenship -
ix Department of Immigration and Citizenship -
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xii FECCA (2006). Submission to discussion paper. Australian Citizenship: Much more
   than a ceremony November 2006.; FECCA submission to the Senate Inquiry into
xiii Ibid.
xiv Ibid.
   Updating the 1999 New Agenda for a Multicultural Australia. Strategic directions for
xvi For example, media interview – Prime Minister John Howard, AM, ABC Radio.
   Thursday 14 December 2006
xvii Department of Immigration and Citizenship -
xviii FECCA access and equity report
xix FECCA access and equity report
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xxiii FECCA (2006). Submission to discussion paper. Australian Citizenship: Much more
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xxiv Ibid.
xxv Ibid.
xxvi Ibid.