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SUBMISSION TO
THE AUSTRALIAN
MULTICULTURAL
FRAMEWORK
REVIEW

SEPTEMBER 2023



spectrum
feel at home

About Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre

Our vision is a world where all migrants and refugees can fully participate in and contribute to Australian society. Guided by values of respect, inclusion, empowerment, and collaboration, our mission is to provide culturally tailored services that assist migrants and refugees in integrating into the community.

The **Multicultural Framework Review** is being conducted by the Australian government, “looking at ways for government and the community to work together to support a cohesive multicultural society and advance a vibrant and prosperous future for all Australians.”

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Introduction

This submission is made by Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre (Spectrum), a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to providing comprehensive migration and settlement support for individuals from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Located primarily in the northern and western areas of Melbourne, Spectrum is an institution with a longstanding commitment to delivering culturally appropriate and responsive services. Our mission is to empower individuals and families to integrate successfully into various aspects of community life in Australia.

Defining a Diverse Australia: The Need for Clarity and Complexity

Complexity of Culture: Beyond a Single Definition

In the discussions around multiculturalism, the term "culture" often emerges as both a point of unity and divergence. The concept of culture is loaded with complexities, nuances, and layers that are not easily captured by a single, uniform definition. Culture encompasses language, religion, social norms, traditions, and even individual experiences that shape one's worldview. As a service provider, Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre recognises that the term is highly contested and can be defined in multiple ways. For example, culture for a newly arrived migrant may relate to their immediate heritage, while for a second-generation Australian, it might mean a blend of their ancestral roots and the local Australian community they grew up in.

The Imperative of Equity: A Non-Negotiable Element

The inherent complexities of culture necessitate the application of equity as a guiding principle in multicultural policies. Equity is not to be confused with equality; while equality provides everyone with the same resources, equity involves allocating resources based on the needs of the recipients. In the context of multiculturalism, equity means acknowledging the unique challenges faced by different communities—be it linguistic, social, or economic—and tailoring policies to address these specific needs. An equitable approach ensures that policies are not only fair but also effective in achieving their intended outcomes.

First Nations: The Foundational Layer of Australian Multiculturalism

Discussing multiculturalism without acknowledging the historical and ongoing oppression of First Nations peoples is not only incomplete but also irresponsible. They represent the oldest continuous culture in the world, and they are the original custodians of the land we all now share. Any conversation, policy, or action plan that aims to address multiculturalism must treat First Nations peoples as a foundational layer and involve them in the decision-making process. This is not merely a matter of token representation but should be a meaningful engagement that respects their unique status and contributions.

The Evolution of Terminology: From Anthropology to Inclusion

The language we use to discuss multiculturalism also warrants reconsideration. Traditional anthropological terminology, while academically valuable, may not resonate with the broader community and can inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes or biases. A shift toward terms that emphasise diversity and inclusion can better reflect the evolving nature of Australian society. For example, instead of merely categorising communities based on ethnic or cultural lines, we should aim for a holistic approach that also considers factors like social and economic conditions, thereby making the discourse more inclusive and comprehensive.

Recommendations for a Clearer, More Inclusive Definition

- 1 **Stakeholder-Defined 'Culture'**: Engage in a collaborative process with various stakeholders, including community members, and First Nations representatives, to define what 'culture' means in today's Australian context.
- 2 **Incorporate Equity as a Policy Cornerstone**: Make equity a foundational principle in multicultural policies, ensuring resources are allocated to communities based on their unique needs.

The Ideal Multicultural Australia – A Vision for a Truly Inclusive Society

A Future Vision: Leadership and Representation

As we imagine the course for a multicultural Australia, the ideal destination is one where equitable representation, social justice, and genuine inclusion are not just catchphrases but lived realities. In this envisioned future, leadership roles at all levels of governance would be representative of the diversity of Australia including the First Nations perspectives. This leadership paradigm would extend beyond ceremonial roles or consultative boards to tangible positions of power where decisions are made. At Spectrum, our vision aligns with this aspirational goal, as we firmly believe in empowering the voices that are often marginalised or overlooked. Furthermore, in positions of influence, whether in the public or private sector, people from various ethnic backgrounds should be adequately represented, reflecting the diversity of the Australian populace.

Equity and Social Justice: From Economics to Social Fabric

In this ideal multicultural Australia, equity would be the bedrock of societal structures. It means more than just equal opportunities; it translates into outcomes. For example, youth crime rates would be low across all communities, not just the privileged ones. Employment rates would not show disparities when broken down by ethnicity or cultural background.

Importantly, there would be higher rates of racial literacy in the general populace, facilitated through education systems that prioritise this as a form of civic education. In this ideal setting, social justice extends to mutual aid, community building, and a strong focus on environmental justice. The policies in place would be designed by a diverse group of stakeholders, ensuring that the laws and systems governing us are formulated through a lens of inclusivity.

Media Representation: A Mirror to Society

One of the key indicators of a mature, multicultural society is how it portrays its diversity in the media. Media in this ideal Australia would offer varied and accurate representations of its diverse citizenry. No single story or stereotype would define any community. Instead, the media would be a platform for amplifying voices that offer a broad range of experiences and viewpoints, thereby educating the populace and fostering a sense of belonging among all communities.

Recommendations for Reaching Our Ideal Destination

- 1 **First Nations Leadership:** Create pathways for First Nations individuals to assume leadership roles in government and community organisations. This could be facilitated through scholarships, mentorship programs, and targeted recruitment drives.
- 2 **Educational Reforms for Racial Literacy:** Introduce educational curricula that foster racial literacy, cultural awareness, and social justice from a young age. These courses should be mandatory and integrated into existing educational frameworks.
- 3 **Stakeholder-Designed Policies:** Establish a multicultural advisory board that includes representatives from various ethnic communities, social justice organisations, and service providers like Spectrum. This board would play a consultative role in policy design, ensuring that a multiplicity of voices is heard and considered.

Positive Forces and Opportunities – Harnessing the Strengths for a Multicultural Future

Community Engagement: The Bedrock of Change

Community organisations, grassroots movements, and the lived experiences of individuals from diverse backgrounds form a significant positive force that can shape the future of multiculturalism in Australia. These entities often work at the front lines, dealing with the immediate challenges and needs of communities, thereby possessing a deep understanding of the nuances involved. At Spectrum, our work often intersects with these community-

based entities, and we can attest to the transformative potential they hold. Such organisations offer not only services but also a sense of belonging and community for new arrivals and established migrants alike.

Economic and Social Support Systems: The Pillars of Inclusion

Australia's existing social support systems, such as Medicare and various Human Rights Frameworks, provide a strong foundation for an inclusive society. However, these systems often operate within a "one-size-fits-all" framework that may not cater to the unique needs of multicultural communities. There lies an opportunity to extend these solid structures to become more culturally and linguistically specific, thereby enhancing their efficacy and reach. For example, healthcare services could offer multilingual support or culturally specific treatments, acknowledging the diverse health beliefs and practices that migrants and refugees may bring with them.

Education: The Wind of Personal and Collective Growth

The education system is another potent force that can significantly influence the trajectory towards a more multicultural Australia. Schools are often the first institutions where young people from diverse backgrounds come together. Education can serve as a conduit for fostering racial literacy, cultural sensitivity, and an ethos of inclusion from a young age. It offers an early opportunity to break down stereotypes and build mutual respect, shaping the future adults who will carry these values forward.

Technology and Innovation: Catalysts for Change

The role of technology and innovation cannot be understated in creating a more inclusive society. From offering platforms that enable the sharing of diverse narratives to providing tools that make language translation easier, technology can be a great levelling tool. Moreover, innovation can improve access to services, making them more adaptable and responsive to the needs of multicultural communities.

Recommendations to Utilise Positive Forces

- 1 **Community Partnerships:** Establish formal partnerships between government agencies and community organisations to ensure that policies are grounded in the lived experiences of the people they affect.
- 2 **Culturally Responsive Services:** Adapt existing social support systems to include services that are culturally and linguistically tailored to the needs of diverse communities. This could involve translating materials and offering community-specific healthcare services.

- 3 **Education Reforms:** Integrate multicultural education into school curricula from an early age. This would include history, social studies, and even literature that reflects Australia's diversity.
- 4 **Leverage Technology:** Utilise technology to improve access to services and to disseminate a broader range of narratives that reflect Australia's multicultural makeup.

Challenges and Obstacles – Identifying and Addressing the Barriers to a Multicultural Australia

Systemic Discrimination: The Heavy Weight of Inequality

One of the most significant anchors dragging down the progress toward a genuinely multicultural society is systemic discrimination. This takes various forms, including racism, gender bias, and other types of social prejudice. It manifests in institutions, policies, and social interactions, creating a perpetual cycle of disadvantage for certain groups. At Spectrum, we encounter firsthand the negative impact of systemic discrimination on our clients and communities, affecting everything from employment opportunities to mental well-being.

Media Misrepresentation: The Distorted Mirror

The role of media in shaping public opinion is immense, and when it fails to offer a balanced, unbiased portrayal of multicultural communities, it serves as an anchor holding back societal progress. Stereotypes and negative portrayals perpetuate misconceptions and can lead to real-world discrimination and bias. This skewed representation not only impacts how communities are viewed by others but also influences how individuals within these communities see themselves, affecting self-esteem and aspirations.

Economic Barriers: The Chain of Disadvantage

Economic challenges often disproportionately affect migrant and refugee communities, creating a further obstacle to their full participation in Australian society. Whether it's the lack of recognition for foreign qualifications or systemic barriers to well-paying jobs, these economic factors can become significant anchors. The cycle of economic disadvantage also intersects with other forms of systemic discrimination, making it a complex issue to address.

Cultural Insularity: The Hidden Anchor

Australia's geographic location and its historical ties can sometimes create a sense of insularity, a hidden but real anchor. While we are part of the Asia-Pacific region, there can be a tendency to look primarily toward Western countries in terms of cultural, economic, and

political engagement. This limits our ability to fully embrace the multicultural tapestry that makes up modern Australia and can subtly perpetuate a sense of 'otherness' among non-Western communities.

Legal and Bureaucratic Hurdles: The Knots in the Rope

The existing legal frameworks, including immigration policies and law enforcement practices like racial profiling, serve as additional anchors. Over-policing and racial profiling are particularly concerning, as they directly contribute to a hostile environment for marginalised communities.

Recommendations to Overcome Challenges

- 1 **Anti-Discrimination Legislation:** Review and strengthen existing anti-discrimination laws to make them more comprehensive and effective. This should include provisions to tackle online hate speech and discrimination, as well as measures to combat the rise of white supremacy groups.
- 2 **Media Accountability:** Introduce regulations that require media outlets to adhere to guidelines promoting fair and balanced reporting on multicultural communities.
- 3 **Economic Inclusion Programs:** Implement targeted economic programs aimed at providing job opportunities and skills training for marginalised communities.
- 4 **Cultural Diplomacy:** Encourage cultural exchange programs and diplomacy efforts that focus on non-Western countries to break down barriers of insularity.
- 5 **Reform Legal Frameworks:** Review existing legal frameworks, such as immigration and law enforcement policies, to ensure they do not disproportionately affect certain communities.

Conclusion

In this submission, Spectrum has attempted to bring forward the collective insights of our community and professional experience to inform the Australian Multicultural Framework Review. We've outlined the complexities in defining a diverse Australia, shared a vision for an ideal multicultural society, highlighted the positive forces that can propel us toward that vision, and identified the challenges that hold us back. Our recommendations offer a roadmap for a more equitable, inclusive, and harmonious future. We strongly urge the Australian Government to consider these insights and recommendations as integral steps towards realising a truly multicultural Australia.