

# harmony

in the workplace

delivering  
the diversity  
dividend

## Fact Sheet 7: Myths and Misperceptions about Cultural Diversity

Multiculturalism, with some peaks and troughs, has been a part of Australian life and national policy for decades. Despite this, misconceptions and stereotypes around cultural diversity still occur within the community and in workplaces.

To minimise the risk posed by such myths and stereotypes, this 'myth-busting' factsheet names and debunks many examples faced by consultants, educators and researchers in Australian workplaces. It aims to:

- Lay these myths/stereotypes open for scrutiny
- Provide alternative viewpoints
- Empower people to combat myths/stereotypes
- Minimise potentially harmful consequences, for example to people's jobs and careers
- Promote an environment where employees can thrive and achieve their best.

So it's very useful information for managers, supervisors, employees, educators and government officials.

good reasons to ensure their influence is neutralised and limited.

By distorting and simplifying reality, stereotypes are unhelpful in addressing daily situations when managing cultural diversity at work. They can also be very harmful to your workers' wellbeing.

### Five types of myths uncovered and explained

The myths and stereotypes we address here are not necessarily exhaustive. Many are linked and overlap. Several are rooted in historical events (such as past immigration patterns) that have now changed. Others stem from embedded attitudes, which may be taken as given or unchallenged. Yet others reflect a simple understanding of structural factors (such as merit-based selection processes).

So, for easy reference and understanding, the myths are grouped under five topic areas:

- Language and culture
- Education and skills
- Immigrants and gender
- Attitudes
- Structural.

Similar myths have been grouped together, where possible, to allow for easy interpretation.

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### Why it's important to debunk the myths

The prevalence of myths and stereotypes around racial and cultural difference is well recognised and documented<sup>1</sup>. They've been discussed for many years, both in Australia and overseas. While stereotypes don't automatically lead to racism and prejudice, there are

## Topic 1: Language and Culture

### Myth 1: Aussies don't have a culture

All Australian citizens are 'Aussies'. However, when people refer to 'Aussies' they commonly mean the majority group of Anglo-Celtic Australians who migrated from the British Isles and who have lived in Australia for two or more generations. The myth suggests that these Aussies lack an identifiable culture. By contrast, other immigrant groups from Europe, Asia, Africa etc. are seen to have stronger 'cultures'. The

oldest cultures in Australia are indigenous cultures, but these are often overlooked.

It doesn't take much to debunk this myth. Think of Edna Everage, pavlova, fish and chips, Australian Rules football, the summer barbecue, drinks after work, the Eureka flag and Waltzing Matilda. The

commitment of most Australians to a 'fair go for all' and egalitarianism are also relevant. The majority Aussie culture is handed down through schools, via the media and within the family and neighbourhood. With it comes a way of speaking – the broad Aussie accent and unique 'lingo' satirised so well in Nino Culotto's 'They're a Weird Mob'<sup>2</sup>. These clear and strong markers of the majority Australian culture are often taken for granted. To recent immigrants and refugees, working or seeking work in Australia, this culture may seem quite different and alien.

### Myth 2: Many immigrants have trouble 'fitting in' to the workplace

The way this myth is expressed assumes there is a dominant culture in the workplace that immigrants may not be comfortable with. If this is the case, it may be time to analyse and question that culture. If it excludes some, reasonable adjustments can be made to make a culture more inclusive. For example, allowing Muslims time for prayers, paying attention to catering at social events and recognising cultural and religious obligations of employees, as well as ensuring the language used in policies is inclusive.

### Myth 3: Most immigrants come from under-privileged backgrounds

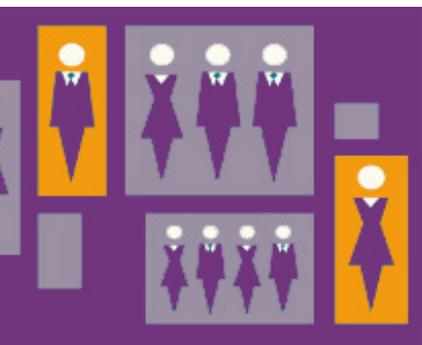
This myth may stem from Australia's past policy of admitting low skilled workers from less affluent regions. However, the majority of recent immigrants to Australia are highly skilled. Their countries of origin may be less developed, but personal economic backgrounds vary significantly. Immigrants today tend to have more sophisticated economic reasons for emigrating (such as study abroad, international transfers or professional development). Others give non-economic reasons for emigrating such as health, lifestyle, adventure, to escape war and conflict, and to live free of religious and political discrimination. In qualitative research, immigrants often say they emigrated to give their children a better education and opportunities even though they were economically comfortable.

### Myth 4: Aussies can't pronounce long names

Long names can occur in any culture. This myth refers to unfamiliar names that many Australians may not have heard, such as those from South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Fortunately, we become used to names once we've heard or seen them a number of times. Southern European names used to be thought exotic and unfamiliar, but most Australians now cope quite well with them. The danger is that resistance to new or longer names can cause caution in employing people from unfamiliar backgrounds. A significant and well-respected body of research documents the prevalence of discrimination in job recruitment on the basis of names (see Fact Sheet 5, Workplace Discrimination and Legal Frameworks). Debunking this myth will be important in addressing discrimination in this area.

### Myth 5: Most immigrants have English language problems

Skilled immigrants to Australia must meet a high level of English language proficiency before they can enter the country. So, this myth probably refers to earlier immigration policies that allowed less fluent English speakers to enter. The perception of English language problems often rests on issues other than proficiency – such as accent, idiom and style of speaking. So, people are really referring to the way that English is spoken rather than the actual level of proficiency. This links back to culture and the ability to understand and



embrace cultural diversity and, with it, different styles of expression. The more open we are to diversity, the easier it is to communicate.

## Topic 2: Education and Skills

### Myth 6: Qualifications gained overseas are generally inferior

State and Territory Overseas Qualifications Units (OQUs) provide a free assessment service to permanent residents for overseas qualifications, except in NSW where it's provided by NOOSR (National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition). Trades Recognition Australia also offers assessments of equivalence in trade qualifications. So it's NOT valid to assume that qualifications earned overseas are not comparable to Australian qualifications, as, in many cases, they are. If you incorrectly make this assumption, you'll potentially miss out on valuable skills that may be required in the workplace.

### Myth 7: The majority of immigrants are unskilled

Again, this perception may be based on an outdated understanding of the Australian immigration program, which now strongly favours skilled immigrant entry. The intake of less skilled immigrants occurred in post-war years when they were needed to fill lower skilled jobs in industries such as manufacturing, transport and infrastructure.

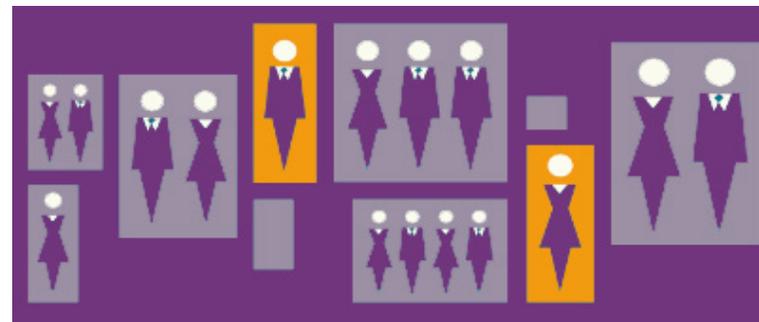
### Myth 8: Overseas experience is not relevant in Australia

This depends on the occupation. Some areas, such as law and accounting, have a higher demand for local knowledge than others, due to legislation and regulations. However, some content is transferrable in these occupations and in others, such as IT and nursing, there may be few major differences. As highly skilled workers, immigrants could readily adapt to local conditions by taking bridging courses or undertaking professional development on the job. Professional accreditation standards are a separate matter. For example, in medicine immigrants must meet the standards set by the Australian Medical Council (AMC) by successfully completing AMC exams.

## Topic 3: Immigrants and Gender

### Myth 9: We need to fix the gender problem first

This argument implies that, as women make up half the population and have not achieved equal employment or parity of outcomes with men, limited resources should be used to support them. This is a myth for many reasons. First, the equity issue is an ongoing one and unlikely to be solved in one lifetime. Fixing the gender problem first may lead to unacceptable delays in recognising the other diversity issues in the workforce, resulting in disharmony,



inequality, poorer health outcomes and lower economic efficiency. Also, gender and culture are not separate categories. Many women in Australia come from culturally diverse immigrant or refugee backgrounds. Diversity characteristics – such as age, disability, gender, sexuality and culture – overlap and co-exist in a person's life experience. So it's impossible to separate gender from other forms of diversity. Lastly, diversity is good for business and the workplace (see Factsheets 2, 8 and 9), so addressing the gender issue first will only lead to partial benefits. To gain maximum benefits, it's important to embrace all forms of diversity. Given Australia's unique multicultural mix, cultural diversity must be an integral part of this strategy.

### Myth 10: Immigrant women are quiet and submissive

### Myth 11: Immigrant women aren't interested in careers or professional development/training

Research into immigrant women and training has shown this is definitely a myth<sup>2</sup>. If these statements were true, where did all the strong female leaders from immigrant women's source countries come

from? Think of Benazir Bhutto, Aung San Suu Kyi, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (President of Argentina), Corazon Aquino and many others. In Australia, immigrant women have risen to prominence within trade unions, community and government sectors (local and state politics in particular). Irrespective of cultural backgrounds, inflexible workplaces and strong gender-biased work systems can present barriers to women's career progression, particularly with the dual family-work responsibilities held by most.

## Topic 4: Attitudes

### Myth 12: We're all multicultural so we can't be racist

Multiculturalism is a demographic reality in Australia. It's also a set of institutions and policies designed by the state to manage diversity in the community<sup>3</sup>. Policies and related legislation – such as the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 – were created to address problems such as racism, which persists despite demographic realities. Research shows that one in five workers in Australia may have experienced race-based discrimination<sup>4</sup>, and that leadership levels of Australian businesses don't reflect the cultural diversity of the wider population or workforce.

### Myth 13: If it's not broke, why fix it?

This statement implies immigrants are fully integrated into Australian workplaces and experience the same opportunities and outcomes as their Australian-born colleagues. Many research studies indicate otherwise. Employment challenges faced by immigrants include "poor recognition of overseas gained qualifications and experience; over qualification for their jobs; high rates of unemployment in the early settlement years...blocked career paths and under-representation in public sector employment"<sup>5, 6</sup>.

### Myth 14: Immigrants get big government handouts

Actually, the reality is the reverse. Most immigrants are not eligible to receive government financial support in the first two years of their arrival. While refugees and humanitarian entrants receive government assistance, it's

targeted to help overcome challenges faced on arrival including low English skills and experience of torture and trauma.

### Myth 15: Cultural diversity is too hard – too many cultures and languages

Our cultural and linguistic diversity are some of our national strengths. Rather than seeing them as 'too hard', they should be celebrated. There are multiple languages spoken in the population, so for any given area or need, it's usually possible to define the top languages spoken by an audience and translate where necessary. Cultures may vary, but immigrant and refugees' cross-cultural challenges are often similar. Learning about other cultures will strengthen our national resources and help us succeed globally.

### Myth 16: Customers won't accept visibly different employees

Australian anti-discrimination legislation prohibits racially or culturally motivated discrimination across a range of public settings, such as education, housing, employment and services. All organisations should avoid accepting real or perceived preferences that may breach these laws. In some cases, an organisation can seek exemptions from the anti-discrimination agency in its state or territory.

### Myth 17: Immigrants are happy to do any job

Skilled immigrants come to Australia hoping to practise and build on their trade, specialisation or profession. So it's very demoralising for them to be forced to work for extended periods in an occupation well below their accredited level of skill. Considerable research in Australia shows that immigrants who are overqualified for their jobs are generally not happy. This can result in skill shortages, wasted productivity, health problems, absenteeism and job dissatisfaction<sup>7, 8, 9, 10, 11</sup>.

## Topic 5: Structural

**Myth 18: Treating everyone equally will result in fair outcomes**

**Myth 19: Special treatment for immigrants is divisive**

**Myth 20: Immigrants are too small a minority to warrant additional programs**

Ordinarily, people join a workplace with varying skill sets, opportunities, family circumstances and personal characteristics, which can lead to differential treatment by society. So, some people need additional or targeted support to maximise their potential in the workplace.



If all workers were treated the same, most workplaces would be supporting unequal opportunities and outcomes – for example, between men and women, immigrants and Australian-born, disabled and non-disabled, older and younger workers. Effective diversity strategies see difference as both a strength and a challenge needing planned responses for an optimal outcome. This must be explained to employees so they understand why targeted programs are used for some workers. Immigrants make up one quarter of the workforce, so they are a substantial minority group.

**Myth 21: Some organisations benefit more from diversity than others**

This suggests cultural diversity affects some industries or occupations more than others. However, most markets in Australia are both global and multicultural. Even locally sourced services cater to culturally diverse clients and the Australian labour force is inherently diverse in many regional areas and urban centres. So, if your workforce is culturally homogenous, it may be time to question why and change this.

**Myth 22: Collecting data on employees' culture/ birthplaces is too difficult**

Unlike many countries, there is no legal requirement in Australia for organisations to collect data on the birthplace or cultural heritage of employees. Privacy issues are often given as a reason why such sensitive employee data can't be collected. This has been solved overseas, in countries such as the United Kingdom, by using data collection approaches that combine information to protect confidentiality. Collecting this data allows employers and policy agencies to audit and improve the level of cultural diversity in the workforce. It also enables organisations to, over time, check the impact of strategic initiatives, such as cultural diversity management programs.

**Myth 23: All selection decisions are based on merit**

Although selection and recruitment systems may appear to be fair and reasonable on the surface, in practice they may restrict or exclude members of disadvantaged groups. The notion of 'merit' itself is not culturally or gender neutral. Also, legitimate selection processes such as key performance indicators may be unknown by people from some countries where they're not used. Members of selection panels may be unconsciously applying culturally-biased assumptions in their practices.

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FECCA

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