

11 March 2021

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee of Employment, Education and Training
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FECCA Submission into Adult Literacy and its Importance

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy, and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency and members to Government and the broader community. FECCA strives to ensure that the needs and aspirations of people living in Australia from CALD backgrounds are given proper recognition in public policy.

FECCA's role is to make sure Australia's multicultural policies strive towards inclusion of all, ensure access and equity to all Government services, provide opportunities independent of ethnic, cultural or linguistic background, recognise people's diverse backgrounds as a value of Australia and rejects all forms of discrimination and racism to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are developed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

FECCA appreciates the invitation from the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training to make a submission to the Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further comment and encourage you to contact the FECCA CEO, Mohammad Al-Khafaji at ceo@fecca.org.au or on (02) 6282 5755.

Recommendations

- 1. Recognise that English language skills do not determine someone's ability to actively participate in Australian life.**
- 2. Recognise the economic and social contributions migrants and refugees make to Australian society.**
- 3. Recognise the importance of strong and transparent access and equity policies to ensure everyone can have equitable access to government services, employment, education, and training, independent of their linguistic background.**
- 4. Support a targeted and flexible Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and fund communities to run English classes to encourage broad participation.**
- 5. Ensure CALD data standards are revised to better capture the complexity of multiculturalism in Australia; and ensure that the revised data standards are used consistently by all Commonwealth and State/Territory Government departments and agencies.**

Overview

FECCA believes we should be working towards the creation of a fair, sustainable, and inclusive society for all new and established migrants. A cohesive society encourages belonging and participation, and provides opportunities for all its people to contribute, regardless of their background. FECCA recognises the important role of adult literacy in helping people to navigate Australian life, including transport, housing, employment and education, and the health and justice system. Most of Australia's new and established migrants and refugees also see the importance of adult literacy for themselves, for the future of their children and for their greater wellbeing in Australia.

It is essential to recognise that knowledge of the English language does not determine someone's ability to be a good citizen or actively participate in Australian life. FECCA emphasises the importance of recognising people's ability to actively participate through volunteer work, through employment, and through engaging with Australian society without 'vocational' English.

Even without English skills, many people help their families by looking after children, volunteer in their community, and find work without the requirement for higher levels of English. While FECCA understands and acknowledges the importance of English for successful settlement and integration, FECCA urges the committee to consider the fact that there are people who will struggle with learning functional English and these people must still be supported with appropriate multicultural services, translated information and interpreters when required. FECCA's most recent Access and Equity Report 2020 outlines areas where improvements can be made to ensure government services and accessing information about said services are accessible for all, independent of their linguistic, cultural and ethnic background.

FECCA wishes to emphasise the following:

1. New arrivals to Australia are generally eager to learn English
2. New arrivals as well as migrants and refugees already in the country generally want to participate and contribute to Australian society.

3. While people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Australia feel positive towards learning English as part of their settlement and integration into the Australian society, many face barriers accessing appropriate English learning.

Discussion

Representing people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, FECCA emphasises how there are several reasons for intergenerational unemployment, poverty, and participation in civic life. Given the opportunity through equitable processes, systems and structures, people from all backgrounds can enjoy equal access to their rights and obligations and have the opportunity to move out of the poverty cycle. It is FECCA's strong belief that being a migrant or a refugee with limited English language skills does not stop people from contributing to Australian society. However, for a fulfilled settlement process where people are supported in participating towards the greater good of the nation, certain processes are needed to encourage, ensure and facilitate this participation and contribution. Examples include multicultural access and equity policies and appropriate, targeted and accessible English language learning programs.

Access and Equity

Australia's multicultural statement¹ and multicultural access and equity policy² clearly articulate the Government's responsibility to ensure that programs and services meet the needs of all Australians, regardless of their cultural and linguistic background. FECCA produces annual access and equity reports which detail multicultural communities' experiences with accessing information about services, rights and obligations as well as the services themselves.

FECCA's most recent report, [FECCA Access and Equity Report 2020](#), highlighted several issues that hindered people in fully taking advantage of their rights and participating in society through the established systems and processes.

Some of the issues raised by many in Australia's CALD communities included:

- The lack of collaboration, coordination and engagement across government services and the difficulties this led to for people in finding consistent information and accessing the correct services.
- The limited interaction between government and multicultural communities, in particular ethnic and multicultural leadership or ethnic and multicultural organisations representing CALD communities.
- The lack of a two-way engagement between government and target groups to ensure communication is effective and understood as intended.
- The limited access to face-to-face interactions making it difficult for people to elaborate on and explain a specific issue as well as being directed towards correct services.

¹ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/mca/Statements/english-multicultural-statement.pdf>

² <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/access-and-equity>

- The lack of cultural awareness and capabilities among many on-the-ground staff leading to people feeling unsafe and unheard, and often dissuaded people from resolving issues.

Government services can fail the most vulnerable groups by being out of touch with actual issues in communities. Missing out on the right to services can limit the maximum participation and contribution of people in Australia. It is essential that services are accessible and made available for all to participate and contribute to the Australian society.

English learning

Limited English language knowledge is often reported to be a barrier to successful settlement, particularly in accessing the labour market and finding adequate skilled employment. However, FECCA highlights that migrants and refugees have enriched this nation through their cultural, economic, familial, and social contributions. Their experiences demonstrate that English language capacity develops over time and that high level English proficiency is not necessary to be a valuable member of the Australian nation.

FECCA has often heard in consultations and in national surveys how people are eager to learn English, find employment and contribute to Australian society in many ways including through sharing experiences and developing connections and a sense of belonging in Australia.

In a FECCA/SCoA (Settlement Council of Australia) report on [Community Driven English Language Programs](#), FECCA found that English classes must be accessible, appropriate and targeted towards the needs of people. Some of the issues raised by migrant and refugee participants in the research included:

- English classes must be timely, flexible, culturally appropriate, and cater for the diversity of arrivals to Australia.
- Migrants and refugees in Australia learn in diverse ways and come from diverse backgrounds. One size fit all will not work when it comes to learning English for new arrivals or for others who have been in the country for a longer period but have yet to access any English learning.
- Not all new arrivals in Australia will enter the workforce and there must be a stronger focus on learning English for people to navigate their everyday lives.

In all government policies on English language learning, there must be an acknowledgement that English learning is a life-long process, and that people learn in different ways and in different settings. Additionally, it must be recognised that not all new arrivals to Australia can start English learning within the first six months or complete it within the following five years. There are many reasons for this including: employment, carer roles, financial responsibilities, low-confidence levels, and dealing with possible injuries or mental health issues. Flexibility is key when developing English language training for migrants and refugees.

FECCA welcomes the changes to the AMEP announced in 2020 including removing the cap of 510 hours and removing the time limits for enrolling, commencing, and completing English tuition. FECCA congratulates the Government for listening to community and stakeholders on the importance of changes to the AMEP. FECCA also endorses Settlement Council of Australia's recommendations in the submission to the inquiry into adult literacy and its importance, where further details into English learning are explored.

Data collection

FECCA emphasises the need to understand the diversity of migrant and refugee communities in Australia. Only by collecting accurate and consistent administrative data can the Government know how to address challenges faced by these communities as well as build on communities' strengths.

FECCA has numerous times noted how current Australian data collection and reporting on cultural and linguistic diversity, particularly in relation to human services planning and delivery (including health, mental health, aged care, and disability) is inadequate. This is true of administrative and survey data, as well as social and medical research.

FECCA suggests that for Government and its services to appropriately respond to CALD communities' needs effectively, they must first understand these communities through accurate and consistent administrative data. This is essential for evidence-based policy, resource allocation and service planning. Only with disaggregated, consistent, and comparable CALD data can Government ensure that services are accessible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all people in Australia.

A broader understanding of the underlying reasons for adult literacy gaps, unemployment and poverty can be reached by collecting appropriate and disaggregated data. FECCA strongly suggests that a focus on evidence-based policy making would better address issues of intergenerational poverty and barriers to unemployment, and help to ensure that people are not marginalised or labelled because they are from a migrant background.