

1. Introduction

< Afghans and their camels working in inland Australia.

The first generation accompanied exploring expeditions across the outback. Their camel teams provided critical transport links, carrying mail and water at a time when railways were few and far between.

The pioneering contribution of the cameleers helped to open up remote inland areas of Australia.

Photograph courtesy National Archives

Introduction

This report provides a snapshot of access and equity issues and responses across Australian Government agencies. State, territory and local governments have also contributed to this report.

An annual *Access and Equity Report* on federal government agencies' performance against an access and equity framework has been tabled in both houses of parliament since 1993. This report covers a two-year period from 1 July 2006 to 30 June 2008. While some of the examples provided are ongoing programs, the focus is on improvements implemented during these two years.

Community feedback sought in preparing the last report highlighted the need to give attention to the delivery of programs and services to older Australians, women and Humanitarian Program entrants. This report includes a focus on the specific barriers experienced by these clients as well as what agencies are doing to address them.

Chapter 1 provides a brief history of access and equity policy development and gives some highlights of the reporting period. Chapter 2, on community feedback, describes barriers to access and equity with an emphasis on the client groups that are the focus of this report. Sections 3.1 to 3.6 provide a range of good practice examples across all levels of government.

For this reporting period, 83 Commonwealth Government agencies have provided responses.¹ Since the last report, published in 2006, many agencies have changed their names or been absorbed or reorganised.

Appendix A contains a list of reporting agencies, acronyms and abbreviations where applicable, and their website addresses.

The evolution of access and equity strategies

The current Access and Equity Framework responds to today's circumstances by building on previous policy approaches to equality of opportunity, the right to cultural maintenance and effective program delivery. The Galbally Report², released in 1978, recognised the need for comprehensive data on the participation of migrants in government programs to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these programs. It also recommended the establishment of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA).

AIMA conducted an evaluation of programs and services post-Galbally, which reiterated the need for migrants to have equality of access to general programs and services irrespective of their cultural or linguistic background.

A report to parliament, *Access and Equity in the Delivery of Federal Government Services and Programs to Migrants*, was published in April 1986 – in effect, the first Australian Government access and equity report.

A further review, *A Fair Go, A Fair Share: Access and Equity for a Multicultural Australia, Access and Equity Report No. 1*, followed in 1988. Between April and June 1990, Access and Equity Open Forums were held to disseminate information about progress and to offer an opportunity for dialogue with the community.

The report of the first federal parliamentary inquiry into access and equity issues, *A Fair Go for All: Report on Migrant Access and Equity* was released in 1996.

In 1998, the *Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society* was formally launched. Until 2006, the charter was the

1. A total of 83 Australian Government agencies also contributed to the previous *Accessible Government Services for All 2006 Annual Report*.

2. The full title is: *Migrant Services and Programs: Report of the Review of Post-Arrival Programs and Services to Migrants*.

key document guiding access and equity strategies and reporting by Australian governments.

The policy statement *A New Agenda for Multicultural Australia*, released in December 1999, specified that multicultural strategies, policies and programs should 'make our administrative, social and economic infrastructure more responsive to the rights, obligations and needs of our culturally diverse population'.

The *Review of Settlement Services for Migrants and Humanitarian Entrants (2003)*, conducted by the then Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs³, and other departmental reviews and consultations, prompted the development of a new framework to streamline agency reporting.

Access and Equity Framework


The new Access and Equity Framework consists of four principles:

- **responsiveness** – government programs and services should be accessible, fair and responsive to the needs of their clients
- **communication** – communication with clients should be open, effective and use appropriate channels
- **accountability** – reporting and review mechanisms should be accessible, transparent and effective
- **leadership** – government agencies should work together, emphasise responsibilities to partners, and encourage participation in our society by all.

Each principle has a set of associated strategies to help agencies apply them to their programs and services and against which they report annually. See Appendix B for more details.

Social Inclusion Agenda

The Access and Equity Framework complements the government's Social Inclusion Agenda. The agenda seeks to combat economic and social disadvantage and recognises that, to be socially included, all Australians must be given the opportunity to secure a job; access services; connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and their local community; deal with personal crises; and have their voices heard. For more information, see www.socialinclusion.gov.au.



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Workplace diversity


Workplace diversity plans have been a legal requirement for government departments since 1999 and also complement access and equity principles and strategies.

In this context, diversity covers gender, age, language, ethnicity, cultural background, sexual orientation, religious belief and family responsibilities, as well as education, life experience, work experience, socio-economic background, personality and marital status. Implementing diversity plans can bring multiple benefits, such as better understanding of clients, increased adaptability, a broader range of services, and innovation and improved services resulting from diverse staff knowledge, experience and viewpoints.

3. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs became the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in January 2006 and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship in January 2007.

Indigenous issues

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) plays a key role in whole-of-government coordination and collaboration in policy development and service delivery in Indigenous affairs.



Collaboration and information sharing between agencies is also important because, as the Commonwealth Ombudsman noted, ‘the complaints that people have against government require individual attention but are rarely unique’

FaHCSIA's programs and activities focus on improving the lives of Australians by building personal, family and community capacity, and wellbeing. Across the areas of Indigenous Australians, seniors, disability and carers, mental health, children, families, women and housing, the department seeks to maximise economic and social participation, focuses on early intervention as a strategy to assist individuals, families and communities and assists those who are most disadvantaged. Coupled with a focus on social inclusion, these policies and programs serve to enhance social justice and equity in Australia.

Further information on these is available on its website at www.fahscia.gov.au.

Other agencies also provide Indigenous programs relevant to their portfolios—including the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations; Department of Health and Ageing;

Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts; and the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government.

Overview

Under the Access and Equity Strategy, government agencies work to improve the way in which their programs and services respond to Australia's cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. The strategy reflects the government's recognition that ‘while services may be universally applicable, they may not be equally accessible’.⁴ It also acknowledges the ‘right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth’⁵ and the need for all government agencies to work together to overcome these barriers.

The concept of access and equity has evolved in tandem with changes in Australia's demographic profile and migrant intake and so too have government programs and services. New issues have emerged. For example, as Australia's earlier migrants age, they can face increasing difficulty with communication. Language skills, especially for those who never attained a great degree of facility in their second language, tend to deteriorate with age.

A wide variety of strategies are now employed by government agencies to help clients overcome cultural and linguistic barriers to services and support their participation in Australian society.

For example, data collection and collation, consultations, and research and analysis of emerging issues and trends are being used to help inform and improve service delivery.

The use of translation and interpreting services, encouraging bilingual and multilingual staff to use their skills, the use of plain English and appropriate channels of

4. *Making Multicultural Australia Access and Equity: Evaluation Summary, 1992*

5. *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, 1989*

communication to disseminate information are helping to address language barriers.

Agencies are now more commonly training staff in cross-cultural and diversity issues and using strategies that test candidates' understanding, interest and experience in these fields in recruitment processes.

Outreach services, tailored programs, workshops and forums have taken services out to clients in remote areas and provided information and education for specific groups such as Humanitarian Program entrants.

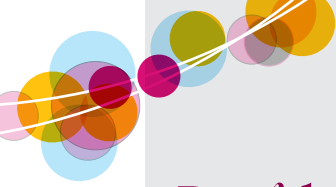
Eliciting feedback from clients, service providers and advocates contributes to the effectiveness of services and programs. Surveys, formal complaints handling procedures and internal review mechanisms help to meet agencies' accountability requirements.

Collaboration and information sharing between agencies is also important because, as the Commonwealth Ombudsman noted, 'the complaints that people have against government require individual attention but are rarely unique'.

This report demonstrates that there is a commitment among Australian Government agencies to the principles of access and equity. They are taking their responsibilities seriously, monitoring and adjusting service delivery, and developing new approaches and programs to meet the needs of Australia's diverse population.

As would be expected, those agencies dealing directly with large numbers of clients, such as Centrelink and the Australian Taxation Office, are at the forefront of innovation in service development and delivery. But some smaller agencies and cultural institutions have also developed fresh, new ways to engage and include more and more members of Australia's diverse and changing demographic.

The three profiles which follow, and those that appear throughout this report, demonstrate the variety and scope of the strategies now being employed at every level of government, as well as in business and community organisations.



Profile

Sweet Tonic

The Music Board of the Australia Council for the Arts assists senior Australians from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds to improve their health and wellbeing through music. Managed by Musica Viva, Sweet Tonic is a two-year project being run at the Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney. It has attracted participants from many backgrounds in the greater Macarthur region and their repertoire of songs reflects cultural diversity through music from England, Norway, Mauritius and Ghana. Participants with a medical history of chronic illness and asthma reported increased lung capacity and remarkable improvements in fitness levels since starting on the project.



Participants in *Sweet Tonic – Music for Life* perform for family and friends to celebrate their achievements. Photograph courtesy Australia Council for the Arts

Profile

The Welcome Wall

The Welcome Wall at the Australian National Maritime Museum stands in honour of those who have migrated from countries around the world to live in Australia and reinforces a sense of inclusion for all Australians. The Welcome Wall faces Sydney's Darling Harbour and Pyrmont Bay, where many settlers first stepped ashore.

Today's Australians are invited to inscribe the names of migrant family members and friends, from the past and the present, on the wall as a personal tribute. Since the announcement of the project in November 1997, nearly 18 000 names have been inscribed and the number continues to grow by thousands each year.

The people named on the Welcome Wall have come from more than 130 countries, and have all brought to modern Australia vivid memories of their homes elsewhere and their homeland's distinctive culture. Registrants are encouraged to record this historical information in the Welcome Wall database which, now holding thousands of entries spanning more than two centuries, increasingly represents a 'folk history' of Australia.



Exploring the Welcome Wall together and its acknowledgement of those who have migrated from countries around the world to live in Australia.

Photograph courtesy Australian National Maritime Museum