

Chapter 1 Access and Equity: Review and future strategic directions



CHAPTER 1: ACCESS AND EQUITY: REVIEW AND FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The 2004 Access and Equity Annual Report foreshadowed a stocktake of the Access and Equity Strategy. A review was undertaken by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA)² in early 2005 in consultation with key stakeholders, including community representatives via the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) and government agencies.

The review acknowledged the importance of the Access and Equity annual reporting process in encouraging and monitoring government performance. It also identified challenges for all agencies in adequately meeting the specific needs of emerging communities and responding to community issues as they occur. It confirmed the continuing need for strategies to assist government agencies to appropriately respond to Australia's evolving and complex cultural diversity.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND STRENGTHS

One of the key achievements the review identified was the continued increase in the number of agencies providing input to the annual report. 2005 saw 84 agencies submit separate contributions to DIMIA for inclusion in the report, compared to 64 in 2004 and 58 in 2003.

While the subjectivity and general inconsistency of Access and Equity reporting was noted, the review acknowledged the value of the current reporting process in ensuring agencies were aware of their responsibilities. In addition, the review noted that the growth in contributions from state and territory and local governments has resulted in an Australia-wide network of Access and Equity contacts.

The review found that the introduction and subsequent refinement in 2003 of the *Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society's* (the Charter) Performance Management Framework (the framework) for Access and Equity reporting has been a further achievement. The adoption of a more quantitative model for assessing and ranking agency performance enabled comparisons to be made over time and also contributed to an observed improvement in the quality of Access and Equity reporting.

In targeting the key roles of government (Policy Adviser, Regulator, Purchaser and Provider) the current framework not only provides a vehicle to focus DIMIA feedback on specific areas of agency performance, it also enables comparisons of performance between high and low performing agencies and a tool to measure individual agency performance from one year to the next. The

² On 27 January 2006, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs became the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA).

framework enables whole-of-government performance trends to be identified and provides incentive, and good practice examples, for all agencies to improve their performance. In particular, the increased reporting by agency line areas against the performance framework provides a regular annual mechanism for raising awareness and focusing attention on the importance of Access and Equity and the Charter principles in government service delivery.

CHALLENGES

Challenges identified through the review fell into two broad categories. The first centred on agency commitment in relation to Access and Equity, and the second to the administration of the Access and Equity reporting process.

The review found that while agencies generally have understood their responsibilities under the Charter and adopted appropriate strategies, in some areas the level of commitment to Access and Equity appeared to be inadequate, resulting in limited capacity for response to emerging community concerns. A perception in the community that Access and Equity was primarily a DIMIA programme suggested that all agencies must take a greater leadership role. This requires greater agency commitment and involvement to ensure the impacts of cultural diversity are considered at the forefront of policy and programme design and implementation.

Further, feedback to the review highlighted a lack of confidence in current Access and Equity reporting as a tool to assess actual performance. Of key concern was that DIMIA relied too heavily on agencies to report accurately and comprehensively on their performance, merely selecting best practice examples to meet relatively basic Access and Equity reporting requirements.

FUTURE STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

In response to these concerns, the review identified strategies for increasing agency engagement and enhancing Access and Equity reporting, including:

- a series of audits of agency responses to cultural diversity
- improved efficiency, transparency and accountability in reporting
- an updated *Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society* and revised Performance Management Framework.

In addition, a new approach to service delivery, involving agencies working in partnership with the community on specific issues based on areas of need, may be required. The cross-government work in late 2005, to develop a National Action Plan to address intolerance and extremism, presents an instructive model for addressing these whole-of-government Access and Equity issues. Key to the success of the model was the involvement of government ministers, key government agencies and representatives of the relevant community.

Partnerships - A Future Model

On 23 August 2005, the Prime Minister, the Hon John Howard MP, and other ministers met with Muslim community leaders and agreed on a Statement of Principles that committed the government and Muslim community to work

together to protect Australia from intolerance and extremism and promote harmony and understanding. At this meeting, the Prime Minister tasked the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs with continuing the dialogue with Muslim community leaders concerning the framework outlined in the Statement of Principles, in consultation with relevant government ministers and their departments.

Shortly after this, on 27 September, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to the development of a National Action Plan to build on the Statement of Principles issued at the Prime Minister's meeting and requested that a report be provided to COAG by the Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The action plan was to bring together the efforts of relevant government departments as well as state and territory governments to deliver an effective means to promote the common goals of harmony and understanding and challenge extremism.

In developing government actions at Commonwealth level, the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs met with key portfolio ministers, including the Attorney-General and Ministers for Family and Community Services, Education, Science and Training, and Employment and Workplace Relations.

A key aspect of the coordination of the government's response was the establishment of an Interdepartmental Committee (IDC), chaired by DIMIA and consisting of representatives from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Attorney-General's Department, the Department of Family and Community Services, the Department of Education, Science and Training, and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. The IDC met on several occasions to develop across-government initiatives to be included in the National Action Plan.

A Muslim Community Reference Group (MCRG) was also established to ensure that community views informed the development of the National Action Plan. The MCRG took a leadership role in building on the principles agreed at the Prime Minister's meeting and provided advice on how issues such as values education, religious training, inter-faith dialogue, community projects and employment programmes could be utilised to encourage community harmony. DIMIA also commissioned research to obtain a better understanding of the issues and environment, and canvass previous work in this area.

Supporting the MCRG, seven sub-groups were formed to consider issues relating specifically to: engaging youth; engaging women; training and education of clerical and lay teachers and leaders; schooling; employment and workplace issues; improving crisis management; and family and community. Each sub-group was supported by the Australian Government agency with primary responsibility for government service delivery in that area. The following case study provides an example of the work of the sub-group formed to consider employment issues and highlights the collaborative nature of the partnership approach.

Employment for Muslim Australians

Background on Muslim employment in Australia

At the 2001 Census, 281 586 people reported that they were Muslim. This represented 1.5 per cent of the total Australian population and an increase of 40.2 per cent since the previous Census in 1996. Over three-quarters of Muslims lived in Sydney and Melbourne.

In 2001, the unemployment rate for Australian Muslims was 19.1 per cent, which was significantly higher than the unemployment rate for all Australians (7.4 per cent). As expected, longer periods of residence in Australia tended to equate with lower unemployment rates, although, even after more than 10 years of residence in Australia, the unemployment rate for Muslims was still almost double that of the Australian average.

Overall, Muslim males (19.4 per cent) were more likely to be unemployed than Muslim females (18.4 per cent). This difference between males and females was quite significant for Muslims born in Australia where the unemployment rate for males was 19.0 per cent and for females, 15.8 per cent.

Also, according to the 2001 Census, Australian Muslims had a significantly lower workforce participation rate than the total Australian population (50.7 per cent compared with 63.0 per cent), with participation rates dropping significantly for recent arrivals (46.1 per cent).

Muslims, both female and male, have reported discrimination in the workplace, both in obtaining and retaining a job. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report, *Isma – Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*³ identified a number of issues that contribute to Muslim unemployment and discrimination in employment. These included non-recognition of overseas qualification or experience, lack of local experience, employer aversion to people with Arabic or Islamic names, fear of client reactions and stereotypes of Muslim women.

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

With a view to improving labour force participation and employment outcomes for Muslim Australians, the Employment Sub-group was formed to provide advice to the Muslim Community Reference Group (MCRG) on employment and workplace relations issues and inform the initiatives contained in the National Action Plan.

³ www.hreoc.gov.au/racial_discrimination/isma/

The Sub-group consisted of representatives of the Muslim community in Australia. The Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) provided secretariat support and specialised input in developing relevant projects from their portfolio's perspective.

Identifying Issues

In helping to identify issues impacting on Muslim employment in Australia, the Terms of Reference for the Sub-group were to:

1. take a lead role in working with Muslim communities and organisations to improve labour force participation and employment outcomes for Muslims
2. suggest ways to enhance labour force participation and improve employment outcomes of Muslims
3. suggest appropriate action to deal with discrimination in obtaining and retaining a job
4. provide advice and report to the Reference Group on employment and workplace relations issues.

The key issues considered by the Sub-group included the need:

- for employment to be understood as a key factor in social engagement and unemployment of Muslim youth as a key risk for extremism
- for greater understanding among employers and Job Network providers of Muslims and their religious values to help address discrimination in recruitment and in the workplace
- for the Muslim community to be provided with more information on employment services and the rights of job seekers and employees, including on discrimination
- to identify avenues for the dissemination of employment related information to Muslim job seekers and employees, including through mosques
- for Muslim teachers and leaders to help young Muslims understand the value of work.

The Sub-group also considered the potential for Muslim job seekers to help address current skill shortages and the services available to those job seekers, including that any new information about these services should be provided in numerous languages and outlets to adequately meet the communication needs of Muslims.

The Sub-group also identified a series of issues for ongoing consideration, primarily around education, awareness-raising and clear communication of both the needs of Muslim job seekers and the services available to them.

Developing Strategies and Solutions

In working towards practical solutions to address the issues identified above, the Sub-group agreed that:

- DEWR would develop initiatives to address Muslim workforce participation and overcome barriers to employment, such as an information pack to assist Islamic organisations to provide advice and guidance to Muslim job seekers and promotion of its online Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Toolbox containing a guide for Job Network members to assist Muslim job seekers
- Muslim teachers and leaders can be supported to work with young people and unemployed Muslims on understanding the importance of education and actively seeking employment
- the Sub-group would consider developing information for employers on the value of employing Muslims to help address skill shortages.

The Employment Sub-group, along with other sub-groups, will continue to develop and implement identified strategies and solutions.

Informing Future Initiatives for Culturally Diverse Job Seekers

While recognising the uniqueness of the issues facing the Muslim community, much of the learning gained through the MCRG Employment Sub-group will help inform broader strategies for all culturally and linguistically diverse job seekers.

For example, access to employment opportunities and optimum use of overseas skills and qualifications continue to be issues of key concern for significant numbers of Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse migrant population. Employment issues for numerous communities were clearly articulated through DIMIA's community consultation avenues during the year and included:

- difficulties in finding suitable work
- difficulties in having overseas qualifications recognised
- workplace racism
- lack of Australian workplace experience
- inability to undertake some types of work due to lack of transport
- concern about possible increasing unemployment rates in future years as males in certain communities, who are primarily employed in low skilled labour jobs, may not be able to sustain physically demanding work past their middle age years.

Lack of awareness among communities about available services and negative perceptions of employers about culturally and linguistically diverse employees are issues which are not restricted to the Muslim community. The Sub-group partnership, with DEWR working closely with Muslim community representatives, DIMIA and other government agencies, provides a useful consultation and community engagement model to use in addressing these issues.

The cross-government work described above provides a good example of partnerships addressing issues for culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The ultimate goal however, is for all government departments and agencies to recognise the diversity of their clients and deal with them effectively without the involvement of the department in the role of facilitator.

For example, the *National Priority Settlement Needs* identified for the Settlement Grants Programme 2006-07 Funding Round included the following key areas: accommodation; community development; education and training; employment; family and relationships; gender issues; health; legal; life skills; social participation; and youth. Further, the FECCA's 2005 report on Access and Equity issues⁴ highlighted several community concerns, including the need for government agencies to ensure: adequate data collection on services provided; access to appropriate interpreter and translation services; access to health services, particularly for older migrant Australians; and access to education and training opportunities.

The effective delivery of mainstream services in these areas can be considerably enhanced by relevant government agencies working in partnership with the community independently of the department. This will not only improve the transition for newly arrived migrants to mainstream Australian citizens and enhance the lives of longer term migrants; it will also contribute to the social and economic well being of all Australians.

⁴ Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia *2005 Report to DIMIA on Access and Equity Issues*