



Workforce Australia inquiry submission

The Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this state and nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we live, learn and work.

We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders past, present and future. We honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique culture and spiritual connection to the land, waters and seas and their contribution to enriching Queensland and Australia's communities.

About the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland

The Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ) is the peak body representing culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Queensland. We have a membership base of over 400 individuals, ethno-specific organisations and multicultural owned businesses. We have been pioneering this work for over 45 years, since 1976.

Our work focuses on strengthening and advocating for the needs of CALD communities throughout Queensland. We do this by building their capacity through the delivery of leadership training, strengthening community associations as well as through the delivery of culturally tailored healthcare programs.

We believe that Australia's systems should allow for every Australian, irrespective of their background, to be able to participate and contribute in all aspects of Australian society. We know that the diversity of our multicultural society is one of Australia's greatest strengths.

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Introduction

Overseas migration consistently contributes to the net gain of Australia's population. The most recent census found 29.1% of Australia's population were born overseas and a recent Australian Bureau of Statistic report shows that "In 2020, Australia ranked 9th internationally for the total number of migrants in its population."¹ These statistics, demonstrate the need to consider how services, such as Workforce Australia, can meet the needs of culturally diverse community members.

The Building a New Life In Australia longitudinal study has followed migrants who arrived through Australia's humanitarian program in 2013 and had received support services for the years following their arrival.² Despite access to employment services, the most recent report released in February 2022, demonstrated that 22.1% of the participants were working for the first time since arrival and 28.7% had first gained work in Australia in the previous wave. The most common reasons respondents gave for not obtaining work was no Australian experience, lack of English, lack of Australian qualifications and no suitable jobs.

The disparity between the economic participation of multicultural communities and the broader Australian community are caused by a number of key barriers, some of which include: lack of opportunities to gain Australian work experience, lack of understanding of the needs of culturally diverse community members, structural barriers and the unconscious bias within the system. This can be reinforced by previous experiences of migrants, some of which include negative governments who have damaged and / or discriminated against them and this impacts on their response to services, and the level of acceptance people feel. In order to build a socially cohesive society, it is essential that all members of the community are supported to access employment.

Throughout the consultation process which guided the development of this response, ECCQ found five key factors which play a pivotal role ensuring equity and accessibility of employment services to enable migrants and refugees to engage in employment. These include:

1. The need for a **tailored approach** to services delivery
2. The need for **engaging community and lived experience voices** in service and program design and delivery
3. The need for **culturally safe services that are responsive** to their clients
4. A system which is **accessible** for migrant and refugee-background clients, and
5. A system which enables **appropriate upskilling** to occur.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *Australia's Population by Country of Birth: Statistics on Australia's estimated resident population by country of birth*.
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/latest-release>

² Department of Social Services; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019, "Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants, Release 5 (Waves 1-5)", [doi:10.26193/OAF6TZ](https://doi.org/10.26193/OAF6TZ), ADA Dataverse, V5

Tailored services

Diverse community members need services that are responsive to, and recognise the intersectionality of, their person and consider all intersections, not just cultural and/or linguistic diversity, but other intersections such as: gender identity, sexual orientation, ability or disability, socio-economic status, religion, education and geographic location. Through each of the three Workforce Australia service consultations ECCQ conducted, which included current service system clients, service providers and community leaders and members, the need for tailored services was highlighted. There are several reasons that the current system is not able to deliver tailored services. One is that the current focus of service providers is on ensuring their clients are compliant, rather than supporting clients to build skills and make connections to gain employment. This takes a lot of time away from service provision. One of the trainees who attended our consultation shared that they had chosen not to engage with employment services as they had heard from other community members that employment services have very high levels of meeting requirements, with very little achieved as an outcome. If service providers were freed up to provide tailored services, taking a role closer to a coach, trust could be built with clients and stronger outcomes could be achieved.

The unique needs of those in regional areas must be considered. Attendees at our consultations from regional areas attested to the lack of place-based knowledge and connections of current Workforce Australia service providers. When it comes to delivering services to clients from migrant and refugee-backgrounds, current service providers in many regional areas do not have specialist knowledge and skills to provide the tailored, culturally responsive services required.

Those who participated in ECCQ's consultations suggested a bigger focus on giving clients autonomy in choosing the services they would like to engage with. In order for clients to be able to choose their services, access to information on the service's rating, the percentage of their staff who are diverse, the number of relationships with employers that service has, the number of interviews the service has been able to set up for clients, the percentage of clients who successfully gained employment and the number of community events the service has attended would be needed to be accessed by clients.

Recommendations:

- ***Separate the compliance requirements and support services, moving compliance to a government-led and owned body, allowing employment service providers to focus on delivering services and support to clients.***
- ***Regional and rural areas include specialist providers, and access to culturally responsive practice training for all staff at their orientation.***
- ***That clients of Workforce Australia services be able to choose their providers and have access to a range of information about service providers, including the diversity of their staff, the number of employer connections they have and their engagement with community.***

Engagement with community and lived experience voices

Research has shown that many people from migrant and refugee-backgrounds gain employment through connections within their own community, as well as the broader community.³ Currently there is no requirement of Workforce Australia service providers to engage with community groups, such as ethno-specific groups. The current service system design does not take into account the unique perspectives of different cultural groups. ECCQ members have consistently reported that assumptions have been made, such as clients don't want to work and negative messages are given from Workforce Australia service providers. Inappropriate opportunities are provided for culturally diverse clients, such as an engineer being encouraged to study an individual support certificate and work in aged care. If a larger number of specialist Workforce Australia providers were built and they regularly met with culturally diverse community groups and attended community events with clients, providers would be able to build understanding of, and relationships with, the community and support their clients to link them with networks of employers and other organisations that can support, raising the numbers of employment outcomes.

Currently many employers exclude or discriminate against migrant or refugee-background applicants,. This is demonstrated by a qualified engineer who reported applying for 450 jobs before gaining employment in Australia, and from research including Lovat (2013)⁴ , who found that Muslim applicants faced discrimination as they attempted to enter the labour market. Additionally, Gatwiri (2021) found that skilled-migrants from African-backgrounds also experienced discrimination and exclusion in addition to employers under-valuing their skills in Australia⁵.

Recommendation: That Workforce Australia employment service providers are required to regularly engage with ethno-specific groups and community services in their area.

Proximity to various multicultural communities and regular engagement by service providers can foster understanding and debunk stereotypes.

Diverse and culturally responsive staff

All focus groups conducted by ECCQ highlighted the need for staffing of health services to be more closely aligned to the diversity of the local population. One participant said, "Not having a professional that looks like us can be challenge". In order for diverse community members to feel a sense of belonging, and welcome into the employment service system, staff need to be diverse and

³ Torezani, S., Colic-Peisker, V., & Fozdar, F. (2008). *Looking for a 'missing link': formal employment services and social networks in refugees' job search*. Journal of intercultural studies, 29(2), 135-152.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860801938617>

⁴ Lovat, T., Nilan, P., Hosseini, S. A. H., Samarayi, I., Mansfield, M. M., & Alexander, W. (2013). *Australian Muslim Jobseekers: Equal Employment Opportunity and Equity in the Labor Market*. Journal of Muslim minority affairs, 33(4), 435-450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2013.866346>

⁵ Gatwiri, K., Mwanri, L., & McPherson, L. (2021). *Afro-diasporic Experiences of Highly Skilled Black African Immigrants in Australia*. Australian social work, 74(4), 480-491.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2020.1856393>

all staff need to be trained in culturally responsive practice. This would include having familiarity with how to work with interpreters and translators.

When service providers do not work in a culturally safe way, culturally diverse clients are deterred from positively engaging with services.

Whilst there is a need for an increase in translated materials, such as online resources and the reporting system able to be accessed in multiple languages, this is no longer enough. There needs to be consideration of how the community listen, engage and learn.

Whilst recognizing that Workforce Australia service providers have access to TIS interpreters, the testimonies of focus group participants demonstrated that this is not always implemented. The lack of consistent use of interpreters who speak the correct dialect not only impacts upon the understanding of clients of available services, but also impacts upon their mental wellbeing and sense of welcome and respect by the service. We heard testimonies that due to the current requirements to meet obligations, many children are reporting on their parents' behalf, because of their higher English and digital skills proficiency.

Different regions have a unique combination of needs, due the different percentages and combinations of multicultural groups and the needs of their population. Therefore, place-based, community-led services are more likely to be able to meet the needs of the consumers in their location, as they are more able to be flexible in their delivery, have more autonomy and be more coordinated between the various government, community and private agencies working in the area⁶. In addition, if specific multicultural provider-led services were established, this would enable information and advice to be more easily shared.

Recommendations:

- ***Workforce Australia service providers proactively seek to employ staff that reflect the diversity of the community they work in by ensuring that the recruitment and promotion process of the employers that they engage with is free from bias, and by actively seeking out and connecting people from different backgrounds with potential employers.***⁷
- ***Workforce Australia provides resources and education for the staff at orientation, including anti-racism training, which allows them to be culturally responsive and communities to thrive.***
- ***Workforce Australia Providers be required to implement a Zero Tolerance Policy: Implementing a zero-tolerance policy for racist behaviour or language can help prevent discriminatory actions from occurring. This includes taking action against any employee who violates the policy, such as disciplinary action, training or even termination of employment.***
- ***Workforce Australia have a consistent expectation that multicultural clients are supported to use appropriate interpreters for their appointments.***

⁶ Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2015) *Commonwealth Place-Based Service Delivery Initiatives*.

⁷ Queensland Government (2022) *Refugee Health and Wellbeing Policy and Action Plan 2022 – 2027*.

Appropriate skilling opportunities

Due to the value of linking and bridging social capital (mentioned above) there is need for greater opportunities for migrants and refugee-background clients to be given opportunities to meet with potential employers in their local area. This was highlighted by those who attended ECCQ's consultations. This could include employers of migrant background.

In addition, one of the major barriers for migrant and refugee-background job seekers is the challenge of getting their qualifications recognised, along with having employers give them an opportunity to demonstrate their professional abilities. There is an opportunity for traineeships, such as those provided by ECCQ through the Building Australian Skills for Employment program, which gives individuals their first Australian work experience.

Those we consulted also shared a need for greater opportunities for clients to receive information relevant to their needs and areas of interest, in particular further information about the processes to follow and requirements for those who want to become self-employed. Others we spoke with shared the need for support in how to stand out from other applicants, or strengthen their ability to share their skills with potential employers.

Recommendations:

- ***Workforce Australia service providers be required to connect clients to potential employers through networking events and interviews.***
- ***Workforce Australia service providers support migrants and refugees with overseas qualifications to connect with employers in their area of expertise.***
- ***Workforce Australia provide appropriate skilling opportunities in line with clients current skills and future career goals.***

Access to the System

Due to the complexity of the current Workforce Australia system, culturally diverse clients are often not aware of what is available to them within the service system. There is a lack of clarity and communication around the role of Services Australia and Workforce Australia. One person reported feeling frustrated and confused when they were told by both Workforce Australia providers and Services Australia staff to report the same Information to the other service.

Another barrier to culturally diverse community members engaging employment services is that all activities are required to be recorded digitally in English, and some multicultural community members do not have the language skills and / or digital skills to meet requirements. If digital resources were available in various languages, and specific training was provided on digital skills, clients would be more likely to meet requirements. This means that family members, including children, complete records on their behalf. In addition, due to the intersection between MyGov, Services Australia and Workforce Australia systems, some migrants struggle to gain access to the system.

Recommendation:

- ***That the Workforce Australia app be available in a variety of languages.***

- *That Workforce Australia providers give all new staff training on how to use interpreters at orientation.*
- *That digital literacy training be made available for clients who do not have the skills to report obligation requirements.*
- *That a shop front for MyGov services are established across major cities, which would allow for more multicultural community members to be empowered to connect with MyGov services.*