

Submission

Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the
COVID-19 pandemic

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Executive Summary

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (the Commission) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senate's Select Committee on COVID-19 inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and any related matters affecting Victoria's multicultural communities.

The Commission is in a unique position to gather intelligence and inform relevant government and agencies on critical issues impacting multicultural communities in Victoria.

There are several critical factors that underpin the Commission's submission:

- Australia has one of the most culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse societies in the world.
- Australia's diversity is increasing.
- Our multicultural diversity has been overwhelmingly positive delivering social, cultural and economic benefits to all Australians.
- To maintain the benefits, and ideally enhance them, we must fully acknowledge and embrace our diversity, requiring intellectual and financial investment.
- With any social or economic objective, there are opportunities and challenges.
- As a nation, we haven't yet fully embraced the opportunities that our multicultural diversity provides nor fully acknowledged or addressed its challenges.
- To ensure genuine access and equity, a positive reframe of the design and delivery of our policies and services is required; one that acknowledges our diversity as a reality and strength; and one that ensures protections against discrimination, vilification, racism and hate.

COVID-19

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on us all affecting our health, livelihoods, job and financial security, as well as mental health and wellbeing.

As the pandemic unfolded, the Commission conducted extensive consultations with our multicultural and faith communities. These included consultations with or through:

- The Commission's Regional Advisory Councils
- the Multifaith Advisory Group
- young people from multicultural communities
- members of the LGBTIQ multicultural community
- people with disabilities or those working with people with disabilities from multicultural communities
- multicultural business community and chambers of commerce
- key stakeholders to learn about the complexities of intersectionality

The Commission was particularly interested in hearing about:

1. the availability and accessibility to information;
2. positive experiences that have come from the crisis; and
3. suggestions to help support the recovery phase.

Common issues raised included:

- unemployment;
- mental health;
- social isolation;
- family violence;
- access to in-language information and resources;
- supporting temporary visa holders and international students; and
- the increase of racism, particularly towards Australian-Asian communities.

Consultation feedback received speaks to the success of State and Australian Governments' swift response to the pandemic and coordinated efforts of the bi-partisan National Cabinet. The Australian community welcomed the establishment of the National Cabinet, and its leadership and commitment to collaborate and coordinate responses in facing the challenges and threat of the pandemic. In addition, the allocation of additional funding and resources, both to address specific issues as well as economic interventions to support employment were most welcomed.

As is the case with the Australian community, some segments within our multicultural communities have and are facing disproportionate challenges as a result of COVID-19. In many instances, these challenges are pre-existing but COVID-19 has brought them to the fore, exacerbated or magnified their impacts. The pandemic has highlighted many systemic issues such as racism and gaps in equitable service delivery and key learnings, offering us a critical window of opportunity to reflect upon and reform policies to appropriately safeguard and address needs of multicultural communities.

While there is an anticipation of an economic recovery post COVID-19, unemployment has historically and disproportionately impacted particular cohorts, including those recently arrived migrants and refugees and those with low English proficiency. Historical economic downturns have also generated reduced support for immigration and multiculturalism and increases in racism and discrimination.

Although the adverse impacts have disproportionately affected some cohorts more than others as with past emergencies and crises, such as the recent bushfires, there have also been some incredible altruistic community led initiatives that have provided support to those most in need, including many multicultural and faith communities. The Commission has heard numerous stories of community/peak organisations, faith organisations, migrant resource centres, community health organisations, grassroots organisations and local businesses in stepping up and filling the void on communication, emergency relief activities and counselling services to support vulnerable members of the multicultural community.

Context

About the Victorian Multicultural Commission

The Commission is an independent statutory body, established in 1983 and now constituted under the *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011*, that strengthens cultural diversity in Victoria through consultation, advocacy, celebration and promotion.

As the main link between communities and government, the Commission holds consultations, forums and roundtables with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities to understand the issues they face. We then work together to identify and recommend potential solutions to government, to make laws, policies and public services more inclusive and accessible.

The Commission is informed by its eight Regional Advisory Councils across Victoria – three metropolitan councils and five regional councils. Each Council comprises up to 50 members drawn from the local area to represent their community. Members are local residents, local government councillors and officers, local businesspeople and service providers from non-government organisations.

Cultural Diversity in Victoria

Victoria is home to one of the most culturally diverse societies in the world and Australia's fastest growing state at an annual increase of 2.1 per cent (Australia's population grew by 1.6 per cent), with a population of 6,566,2000 as at 31 March 2019.

Migration to Victoria has resulted in increasing diversity. Net overseas migration was the major contributor to the state's population change and net interstate migration gains for Victoria were the second highest recorded in the year ending 31 March 2019.¹

At the 2016 Census, 49.1 per cent of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas. In 2018, Victorian Government schools' population included 197,742 students with a language background other than English, with the main languages identified as Arabic, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Chinese.²

Cultural Diversity in Australia

Australia is known to be a vibrant and multicultural nation – our cultural diversity embodies our national identity and social fabric. With 28% of Australia's population born overseas and net overseas migration accounting for 64% of population growth to March 2019, Australia has much to gain from migration both economically and socially. Migrants play a vital role in generating business activity and economic growth in Australia, bringing innovation, skills and dynamic workforce to the labour market and particularly in regional and rural areas. Regarding attitudes to multiculturalism, The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion Survey 2019 found that 85% of respondents agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia and 64% respondents believe that migrants make Australia stronger.³

Multicultural Lens – Success and Potential

Victoria is regarded as one of the most diverse, socially cohesive and successful multicultural societies in the world. This outcome has arisen not by chance but through collaborative government and community leadership and through dedicated legislation, policies and programs designed to facilitate genuine access and equity.

Victoria's multicultural community infrastructure comprises of more than 4,000 ethno-specific, faith-specific and multicultural community organisations, some of whom are peak bodies and subject matter experts. These organisations provide a myriad of benefits particularly in the context of facilitating successful settlement but are often inadequately utilised.

It is widely acknowledged that our diversity delivers substantive social, cultural and economic benefits for all; whether it be through people to people links delivering trade and tourism benefits to the bringing in of skills and entrepreneurship to infusing creativity into the areas of arts and culture.

Obviously, there are associated challenges and the need to address these if we are to ensure genuine inclusion and equality. But if done well these challenges and costs are relatively small when compared to the real and potential benefits, particularly over the longer term. Australia has undertaken this comparatively well and as the Scanlon Foundation's annual Social Cohesion survey has shown, support for a multicultural society has remained exceptionally high at 85 per cent (2019). However, we cannot rest on our laurels and given what has been occurring elsewhere in the world, where division and polarisation within societies have increased, we need to further invest our efforts towards building a socially inclusive and resilient nation; one that can show the way to the rest of the globe.

To maintain and enhance up on our success to date requires a genuine acknowledgment and embracement of our cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. Our nation's history has shown that this embracement has taken time, transitioning from assimilation to integration to multiculturalism. Our predecessors came to the realisation that the former two frameworks were failing, and we must be vigilant in ensuring that we not only do not regress but also to take up the opportunity to genuinely address the disadvantages that exist.

As indicated earlier, our diversity has often been positively touted and championed in the areas of trade, tourism, skills and cuisine, yet the benefits and strengths haven't been fully considered or embraced within the context of public sector service delivery.

The debate of mainstream versus ethno-specific/multicultural is misplaced; rather it should be seen as complementary. Reframing the multicultural community infrastructure as a complementary component to service delivery in a society that is increasingly diverse is critically important, not only in facilitating inclusion, access and equity but in the longer term will deliver reduced costs and improve productive participation, a sense of inclusion and belonging and enhance social cohesion.

This is not about developing dual or multiple track services or duplication but rather supporting complementary and transitional services that facilitate access to mainstream services.

While the VMC's focus is on the needs and aspirations of Victoria's migrant and refugee communities, it is also critically important to note that, through practically all indicators of social inclusion and exclusion, that those faced by Australia's Indigenous communities is most glaring.

Recommendations

The Commissions has formulated the following recommendations based on feedback on critical issues impacting Victoria's multicultural communities during COVID-19:

1. Given Australia's changing demographics, that governments and agencies fully embrace our multicultural diversity when designing policies, programs and services to ensure genuine equality of opportunity and access for all.
2. That in the context that "we're in this together" that Government actively promote social inclusion and social capital in overcoming the COVID-19 crisis, and future crises, to combat racism and discrimination, build resilience and celebrate social cohesion.
3. Provision of timely, accurate and accessible in-language resources and information as a key component of the government's communication strategy and plan to support multicultural communities in navigating COVID-19 and future crises by:
 - a) consulting multicultural organisations and multicultural faith organisations to ensure cultural responsiveness and improve information dissemination at community level;
 - b) ensuring priority languages reflect community demographics, capturing both longer established, larger and newly emerging and smaller communities;
 - c) engagement through targeted multicultural media platforms including SBS, community radio, multicultural radio and social media platforms;
 - d) reviewing regulations on social media to maximise its positive role and information dissemination capacity while at the same time minimising the spread of social dis-harmony, cyber bullying and hate trolling;
 - e) utilising community and faith leaders as trusted sources to deliver critical information; and
 - f) ensuring in-language messaging, including sign language or it's equivalent, is prepared and disseminated at the same time as mainstream messaging to avoid information lag to multicultural communities.
4. Ensure greater consistency and comparability of data collection across agencies and service providers to better respond to COVID-19 recovery and crises management in critical areas of mental health, family violence, employment and education.
5. That inclusive and equitable supports be provided for multicultural communities in crises situations, including temporary visa holders, international students, asylum seekers and refugees as contributors to the Australian economy and our diverse society.
6. Working with service providers, intersectional multicultural community groups and state and local governments to be review service delivery during COVID-19 of critical areas including mental health, family violence, employment and education to:
 - a) identify the gaps and improve cultural responsiveness of mainstream services,
 - b) ensure workforces are diverse, bi/multi-lingual and have cultural understanding and awareness,
 - c) establish more strategic and long-term funding partnerships between mainstream and multicultural service providers, and
 - d) share learnings across programs to better prepare for future crises
7. Ensure multicultural/multifaith organisations form part of the systems response to crisis and recovery.
8. That the migration program be utilised to facilitate efficient and strategic pathways to permanent migration to support economic recovery post-COVID19 and restore social cohesion.

Government Responses

The Commission received positive community feedback on the Federal and State Governments and National Cabinet's leadership, collaborative and coordinated response in facing and containing the pandemic. Consultation feedback speaks to the success of the leadership in assisting communities navigate the crisis and allocating funding and resources to address specific issues, as well as economic interventions to support businesses and employment. However, community feedback also called for government interventions be more targeted and needs based.

Victorian Government interventions

The Victorian Government introduced a range of unprecedented interventions and programs to support all Victorians through the devastating impacts of COVID-19, with combined support for businesses, workers and the community exceeding \$3 billion. Some key initiatives include:

- Victorian Economic Survival Package (\$1.7 billion)
 - Working for Victoria Fund (\$500 million) to help the Victorian community through COVID-19
 - Business Support Fund (\$500 million) providing one-off grants of \$10,000 to support affected businesses in the hardest hit sectors
 - Payroll Tax Refund
 - Rent relief for tenants in Government buildings
 - Land Tax Deferral
 - Freezing Fees and Fines
- Temporary laws to Support tenants and landlords (both commercial and residential)
- \$59.4 million in surge funding for increased demand for mental health services and an additional \$19.5 million to fast track the delivery of recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System's interim report.
- International Student Emergency Relief Fund (\$45 million)
- Rent relief grants through DHHS
- Victorian Government's COVID-19 Response Package for Multicultural Communities (\$11.3 million):
 - \$500,000 in small grants funding to support multicultural media outlets with new equipment and technology
 - Almost \$2 million to support community wellbeing and connection and deliver practical supports through existing networks and community organisations
 - Nearly \$5 million to deliver initiatives to support at-risk families, promote youth wellbeing and address youth disengagement
 - \$2.2 million to support asylum seekers and refugees facing financial hardship through basic needs assistance packages that provide practical support to buy food, clothing and other essential items
 - \$1.1 million to support multicultural and ethno-specific organisations to deliver culturally appropriate family violence prevention and early intervention
 - \$1 million in additional funding to ensure that those who need interpreters can access them
 - \$50,000 for the Victorian Multicultural Commission to work with community leaders to respond combat racism and work with community leaders to respond appropriately to racism incidents.

In addition, the Victorian Government, translated key health and safety messages in to 48 community languages.

Victorian Multicultural Commission supporting communities

Since the beginning of COVID-19, the Commission has played a key role in supporting Victoria's multicultural communities. The Commission conducted a round of consultations with key stakeholders, multicultural and multifaith community groups, young people, people with disabilities, multicultural business community and service providers to learn about the critical issues impacting multicultural communities during COVID-19, and provide advice to the Victorian Government and agencies on how to better support multicultural communities during this particular time of need.

The Commission also facilitated messaging and shared information and resources on COVID-19 restrictions and supports available to multicultural communities. In supporting the Premier of Victoria's fight to combating racism, the Commission has joined with the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) to respond to the increased COVID-19 related racism, particularly affecting Asian-Australian communities.

Community Responses

The community response to COVID-19 has been compassionate and overwhelming. The Commission has received numerous reports on multicultural community groups and organisations who have mobilised support for vulnerable cohorts – some examples include:

- regularly checking in with isolated individuals who are without extended family supports;
- food drops and delivery of essential goods for vulnerable community members;
- establishing a donation line or service to support asylum seekers, temporary visa holders and international students; and
- churches offering small financial assistance for vulnerable community members.

The increased reports of community volunteerism and collaboration amongst community leaders in reaching out and supporting their communities has been an exemplary form of social capital and building community resilience in times of need. In addition, faith leaders have played a significant role in supporting communities spiritually and keeping them connected via live streaming of religious practices throughout the lockdown period.

Key Feedback arising from the Commission's community and stakeholder consultations. See Appendix for additional information.

Communication

Translated information

- Given our diversity it is vital that in-language information and resources are central to the development at the outset of a communication plan and strategy – covering both the initial phase of warnings and restrictions as well as subsequent phases.
- Provision of timely, accurate and accessible in-language information and resources to support multicultural communities in navigating future crisis situations – not only key safety and health messages but also on specific initiatives and programs to ensure access to services (e.g. employment, small business, employment, family violence, mental health etc).

Delivery of key messages:

- The delivery of key messages by political leaders and experts must be complemented by utilising trusted sources within multicultural communities including community leaders and advocates (including women and young people), faith leaders, bi-cultural workers and bilingual professionals such as nurses, doctors, pharmacists, social workers, psychologists and the like.
- Providing and supporting these trusted sources with key messages will not only facilitate information sharing but mitigate against misinformation and rumours.
- Utilising media channels including multicultural media, particularly SBS TV and Radio, community radio and social media platforms.
- Ensuring that multicultural community organisations, faith organisations are part of the systems response to communication, emergency relief and recovery planning in crises situations – e.g. providing timely in-language alerts via SMS text, email or print that can be disseminated by community leaders.

Data

- Lack of adequate and reliable diversity data is a substantive issue pre-dating COVID-19.
- The medical data available on flattening of the curve of infections in Australia demonstrates the proactive responsiveness of the Australian community in dealing with the pandemic.
- However, enhancing the data collated to incorporate additional demographic details such as birthplace, ethnicity, faith and language spoken would inform a targeted communications strategy and emergency response more effectively.
- Collecting demographic data needs to be consistent with ABS Census data sets to allow comparative analysis across agencies and service providers to better respond to communities' needs.
- A clear explanation to the public as to the rationale and benefits of data collation, and assurance of privacy protections needs to be given.

Leadership

- We instinctively look to government and organisational leadership for guidance and stability in navigating crises - Federal and State Governments have risen to the unprecedented challenge to manage the health emergency and mobilise our collective good will in dealing with the significant economic and social impacts of the imposed health emergency response measures.
- However, there is consensus around the notion that the Federal Government could have demonstrated greater leadership and policy direction around supporting vulnerable cohorts such as temporary visa holders and international students, with many ineligible for government supports, unemployed, living in poverty, homeless and/or at risk of poor mental health outcomes.
- A more considered and humanitarian approach would have been appropriate, particularly given that many temporary visa holders were left stranded and unable to return to their countries of origin.

- Evidence points to the positive and vibrant contribution of temporary visa holders and international students to the Australian economy and society - their participation in Australia's labour force and economy are critical to the COVID-19 recovery phase.
- Community groups, charities, local businesses and the Victorian Government have stepped up to provide meals, donations and financial supports to vulnerable members of communities who aren't receiving government supports.
- Fundamentally though, many of the international students, most of them very young adults, were left vulnerable having lost employment to sustain themselves, unable to return to their countries of origin and ineligible for many of the supports provided by the Federal Government. There is a duty of care.

Social Cohesion & Racism

- Increased reporting of racism and discrimination, particularly against people from Australian-Chinese and Asian backgrounds, compromising their sense of safety and sense of belonging which has led to isolation, distress and fear.
- Communities have called for an immediate, comprehensive and long-term implementation of an anti-racism campaign, to consist of:
 - Development of positive messaging
 - Supportive media campaigns
 - Promotion of community goodwill news stories
 - Use of social media, the arts and technology to create more awareness about the impacts of COVID-19 related racism
 - Work with the Human Rights Commission and similar agencies to fight systemic racism, support the reporting process and create awareness about the detrimental impact racism has on individuals and communities more broadly.
 - Use technology to build social connections and increase participation – explore partnerships with community groups and provide necessary funding and devices.
- There is a need for dedicated funding for programs that build social connection and participation to support vulnerable cohorts throughout the recovery and re-integration processes.
- Promote social cohesion and social capital in overcoming the COVID-19 crisis to build community resilience, reduce racism and discrimination and celebrate our shared humanity.
- Opportunity to review social media reporting guidelines and methods to call out racial cyber bullying and use its potential to create awareness on the impacts of racial vilification on individuals and communities.

Employment

- Reducing casualisation of workforce to improve job and long-term financial security.
- Investigating trends in labour market to determine where skilled migrants can meet demands and fill skill shortages in during post COVID-19.
- Creating more awareness about employment rights and responsibilities to protect temporary migrants from precarious work conditions.
- Ensuring that temporary migrants have adequate social protections from precarious work conditions, including underpayments in the workplace, exploitation and racism and discrimination.

Youth

- There is a need to increase availability of online programs for multicultural youth to strengthen skills, showcase talent and build social cohesion.
- Explore ongoing opportunities to co-design tailored policies and programs with multicultural youth to address issues within their communities, particularly during and post COVID-19.
- Inability to participate in sports and outdoor activities, including cultural dancing, community language and faith activities has disrupted social connectivity for many young people, exacerbating marginalisation and youth disengagement.
- Reports of increased intergenerational issues as families are living together during lockdown.

Education – Home Schooling

- Home schooling presented challenges for some families from multicultural communities, particularly in ensuring access to devices and internet, following online child safety protocols and access to additional educational supports, especially where parents are unable to assist because of lack of subject knowledge, language barriers and/or low English proficiency.
- Some families are overwhelmed in managing home schooling, working from home arrangements, with some attending to multiple children at the same time.

Mental Health

- Social isolation measures impacting mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable cohorts, particularly the elderly who don't have access to devices to maintain social connections.
- Young people who have lost their jobs and/or are home schooling are experiencing increased feelings of uncertainty about their future.
- Better equip community leaders to identify mental health issues and provide referral pathways to specialised mental health services for members of their community.

Family Violence

- Experiences of COVID-19 being used as a threat to control women and children, and referral pathways have fragmented during the transition to online service provision.
- Increasing concern around prevalence of family violence in refugee communities.
- Increase in family violence related case workload and bystander calls.
- Prevalence of underreporting of family violence during isolation period (significant barriers to reporting as perpetrators isolating within the same environment, leading to increased experiences of violence).
- There is a critical need for greater referral pathways to accessing emergency accommodation and family violence support services in regional/rural areas, particularly for multicultural communities during COVID-19.
- Need for strategic and dedicated funding to family violence service providers to develop prevention strategies and increase capabilities to support vulnerable families in the context of COVID-19 related social isolation or crises periods.
- Reform funding opportunities and strategic partnerships to effectively respond to increased needs for family violence services and capacity for emergency response, including through ethno-specific, faith-specific and multicultural organisations.

Service delivery

- Engage multicultural service providers and organisations to inform coordination and response to social issues such as family violence and mental health through strategic partnerships with mainstream service providers.
- Employ a bicultural workforce to improve capability and cultural responsiveness of mainstream services and better respond to needs of multicultural communities – particular focus on providing culturally safe 'spaces' to discuss issues such as family violence and mental health.
- Service delivery modules during COVID-19 have transitioned from traditional service delivery to online modules creating additional barriers to access for multicultural communities.
- Work with grassroot organisations to ensure existing service delivery modules are reaching vulnerable cohorts.

LGBTIQ Community

- There is a pressing need to support multicultural LGBTIQ communities during COVID-19 and beyond with particular concern around increased family violence, poor mental health and wellbeing

outcomes, increase in self-harm and marginalisation, with reports many young people having become unemployed and have returned to live with their families and 'return to the closet'.

- Some intersectionality cohorts don't have strong connections within their multicultural community group, particularly within LGBTIQ multicultural communities in facing complex issues around sexuality, religion, social norms etc additional layer of vulnerability.

Disability community

- Need to increase capacity of NDIS caseload management.
- Form a national disability advisory group to explore multicultural intersectionality issues and co-design solutions to address gaps.

National migration program & Temporary Visa Holders

- That the migration program be utilised to facilitate efficient and strategic pathways to permanent migration to support economic recovery post-COVID19 and restore social cohesion.
- Currently there are around 2.2 million temporary visa holders living in Australia, entering as working holiday makers, students and temporary skilled workers.⁴ They contribute to the workforce, economy, and social capital despite not having equal rights and protections as their constituents. Often, they have limited to no agency in their settlement experience or in the decision making affecting them.
- Provide clearer and more accessible pathways to permanent migration for temporary visa holders to improve settlement outcomes, preserve skills and knowhow and bolster the Australian economy.

Supporting temporary visa holders, international students, asylum seekers and refugees

- Need for inclusive and equitable supports for multicultural communities in crises situations, including temporary visa holders, international students, asylum seekers and refugees as contributors to the Australian economy and our diverse society.
- The skills and networks of migrants have overwhelmingly contributed to our economy through various sectors, some of which have been the worst affected in this pandemic.
- The Australian Government announced unprecedented economic stimulus packages and welfare supports to safeguard our economy and individuals. Unfortunately, some cohorts were/are ineligible for the supports despite their contribution to the economy and social fabric of Australia.
- International education is one of Australia's largest sources of revenue for the Australian economy. In 2019, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that in 2017-18, international education quantified to \$32.4 billion to the Australian economy, in addition to providing unending social, cultural and workforce benefits.⁵
- Despite the invaluable contribution of international students to the social and economic fabric of Australia, international students have been asked to return to their home countries if they cannot support themselves during the pandemic. Similar experiences for temporary visa holders and asylum seekers, some of whom have been in Australia for many years in search for pathways to permanent migration whilst contributing to our vibrant economy and filling skill shortages. The additional financial cost the Australian Government could have worn to extend supports to these communities would have been significantly gained through the economic recovery phase and beyond.
- Serious concern around the implications of financial hardship experienced by international students and temporary visa holders due to ineligibility for welfare and economic supports.
- Lack of understanding of implications for international students and temporary visa holders in accessing superannuation to financially self-support during COVID-19 and until employment resumes.
- New South Wales and Victorian State Governments, local businesses, universities and ethno-specific communities are providing financial and accommodation relief, food, supplies and clothes to vulnerable community groups ineligible for the Federal Government's relief packages.

- Extend eligibility of Job Keeper scheme to temporary visa holders, international students and casual workers from multicultural communities who have contributed to the Australian economy and need equitable access to support to survive economic fallout of COVID-19.

Appendix

Feedback received from VMC consultations

Availability of in-language resources on COVID-19 related information

- The need for in-language information on COVID-19 and restrictions developed as part of the initial dissemination. There was a delay in providing translated information on government websites during the initial phase of the pandemic, which meant that critical information on the virus was not reaching multicultural communities and caused community concern and panic.
- Critical need to provide up to date in-language and simple English visual and audio resources about COVID-19 for multicultural communities, particularly to support disability and elderly communities and for those with literacy and English language barriers.
- Delays in processing and understanding COVID-19 related information has caused heightened anxiety amongst multicultural communities, particularly by intersectional cohorts and put them in situations where they access news from their country of origin, creating a further heighten sense of confusion, fake news and misinformation.
- Underrepresentation of intersectionality in messaging and information about COVID-19 and restrictions; for example, there is a lack of simple in-language audio and visual resources for disability community.
- Lack of culturally appropriate information on referral services and supports available to women experiencing family violence during social isolation.
- Lack of in-language information and resources provided by mainstream services, particularly on critical areas of mental health, family violence and reporting racism.
- Lack of information regarding gradual easing of restrictions, re-opening of international borders and discussions around what Australia will look like post-COVID19, is disproportionately affecting the mental health and wellbeing for vulnerable cohorts of multicultural communities, particularly those awaiting family/partner reunification and with family/links to their countries of origin.
- Some information and messaging reaching communities is incorrect and irrelevant to the Australian context.
- Need to provide clear and measured advice on community health and safety, an indicative timeline of easing of restrictions and implications for communities, as well as clarity around accessing available welfare supports, eligibility and processes involved.
- Need to consult with multicultural communities in developing culturally responsive information and resources to address their needs as they navigate stages of COVID-19, particularly disability communities and elderly cohorts who rely on support services on a day to day basis.

Accessibility of COVID-19 related information

- Need for additional referral pathways and strategic information sharing to ensure equitable access to available services and government supports, particularly to hard to reach groups at the grassroots level.
- Multicultural communities' source COVID-19 related information predominately from the internet, news, community radio, social media and community networks, however consistent community feedback highlighted the lack of connectivity for some community groups such as elderly Victorians and those unable to afford internet access and devices.
- Faith, community leaders, local MPs and bi-cultural workers have been identified as providing information to multicultural communities, predominately via word of mouth.
- Need for additional and ongoing funding to deliver in-language and interpreting telephone services for people from multicultural communities facing literacy barriers or difficulty accessing digital resources.

Building community confidence and strengthen social cohesion.

- There has been a positive community response to the Federal Government's 'stay at home' messaging and social distancing practices to flatten the curve of infections.
- Positive feedback received on the Federal Government's efficiency in closing Australia's borders and strict quarantine and social distancing measures and messaging.
- Charities, local businesses and community groups have stepped up to provide meals, donations and financial supports to vulnerable members of communities who aren't receiving government supports.
- There are concerns around inconsistencies in government messaging, exacerbating feelings of social marginalisation, e.g. temporary visa holders, refugees and asylum seekers cannot relate to 'We are in this all together' and similar messaging.
- Incidences of 'over policing' and targeting of people from disability communities receiving fines during social distancing restrictions in public spaces.
- There is a pressing need to target messaging to promote social cohesion and protect ethno-specific communities from racism and discrimination.
- Need to develop positive messaging, supportive media campaigns and promote good news stories related to community goodwill and the support provided by ethno-specific communities.
- Consult and co-design coordinated responses with stakeholders and communities to ensure inclusive policies and programs support multicultural communities and vulnerable cohorts throughout the recovery phase so that no one is left behind.
- Alternative messaging to 'temporary' when referring to asylum seekers and international students to reduce discrimination towards migrant communities and restore confidence within multicultural communities.

Provision of inclusive and equitable supports

- Serious concern around the implications of financial hardship experienced by international students and temporary visa holders due to ineligibility for welfare and economic supports.
- Lack of understanding of implications for international students and temporary visa holders in accessing superannuation to financially self-support during COVID-19 and until employment resumes.
- Reports of over 200 asylum seekers in Victoria having become unemployed or underemployed in April alone, with self-reliant asylum seekers desperate for assistance not eligible for Job Keeper support.
- Families who have lost one or both incomes are financially struggling to pay mortgages, rent and put food on the table, and those without family support are left to live off any savings or superannuation funds.
- Despite rent moratoriums and mortgage leniencies having provided some financial relief, communities are concerned that they won't be able to repay these debts post COVID-19 due to job and financial uncertainty.
- Increase in precarious/unsecure housing despite moratoriums on rental property evictions.
- Concerns around equitable employment pathways for vulnerable cohorts during the recovery phase.
- Reported increase in anxiety and concern around what the COVID-19 recovery phase will look like for asylum seekers and refugees, particularly around job security and family reunification.
- Concerns that international students will withdraw or defer studies as they are unsupported and the possible implications for universities and the economy more broadly.
- Some international students, including those from India, are not able to return to their countries of origin due to border closure, nor are they able to access financial assistance from family or government overseas.
- Concern around social distancing as a barrier to access services and government support as many service providers are finding it very difficult to reach those most vulnerable within their communities.
- Home schooling presents challenges for some families from multicultural communities, particularly in ensuring access to devices and internet, following online child safety protocols and access to additional educational supports, especially where parents are unable to assist because of lack of subject knowledge or language barriers.

- Many families are overwhelmed in managing home schooling, working from home arrangements, with some attending to multiple children at the same time.
- Social isolation measures impacting mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable cohorts, particularly the elderly who don't have access to devices to maintain social connections.
- Young people who have lost their jobs and/or are home schooling are experiencing increased feelings of uncertainty about their future.
- Need to extend eligibility of Job Keeper scheme to temporary visa holders, international students and casual workers from multicultural communities who have contributed to the Australian economy and need equitable access to support to survive economic fallout of COVID-19.
- Create greater awareness around rights and responsibilities in accessing superannuation for individuals who are ineligible for Job Keeper scheme.

Positive responses

- New South Wales and Victorian State Governments, local businesses, universities and ethno-specific communities are providing financial and accommodation relief, food, supplies and clothes to vulnerable community groups ineligible for the Federal Government's relief packages.
- Universities supporting at risk international students with meals and supplies.
- Offering of online training options and English language courses to meet visa and welfare requirements.
- Faith communities accessing live streaming of religious practices.
- Embassies and international agencies working with citizens in repatriation efforts and support network.

Service delivery

- Experiences of COVID-19 being used as a threat to control women and children, and referral pathways have fragmented during the transition to online service provision.
- Increasing concern around prevalence of family violence in refugee communities.
- Increase in family violence related case workload and bystander calls.
- Increase in men experiencing family violence and mental health issues during COVID-19.
- Prevalence of underreporting of family violence during isolation period (significant barriers to reporting as perpetrators isolating within the same environment, leading to increased experiences of violence).
- Increasing reports of mental health issues due to social isolation, particularly within elderly multicultural cohorts.
- Need to increase capacity of NDIS caseload management.
- Critical need to provide appropriate upskilling, employment support and mental health services for people from multicultural communities who have become unemployed as a result of COVID-19.
- There is a need to support the transition of multicultural businesses online to be able to survive post-COVID19.
- Women on partner/spousal visas have been identified as one of the most vulnerable cohorts during COVID-19; there is a critical need for additional supports to safeguard these cohorts, build social connections and strengthen their sense of belonging.
- Increased reporting of drug and alcohol use during COVID-19.
- Form a national disability advisory group to explore multicultural intersectionality issues and co-design solutions to address gaps.
- Better equip community leaders to identify mental health issues and provide referral pathways to specialised mental health services for members of their community.
- Increase availability of online programs for multicultural youth to strengthen skills, showcase talent and build social cohesion.
- Develop online programs promoting physical and mental health and wellbeing run by professionals to support multicultural communities in self-care strategies.
- Work with grassroots organisations to ensure existing service delivery modules are reaching vulnerable cohorts.

- Engage bicultural workforce to relieve the overburdened service delivery system and better meet the needs of multicultural communities.
- Promote bicultural workforces within the service delivery sector to provide equitable, culturally responsive and culturally safe ‘spaces’ to discuss critical issues such as family violence and mental health.
- Adopt holistic approaches and trauma informed counselling to assess and respond to diverse and complex needs of vulnerable cohorts during COVID-19 and beyond.
- Explore innovative ways to reskill people who have lost employment.
- Provide strategic and dedicated funding to family violence service providers to develop prevention strategies and increase capabilities to support vulnerable families in the context of COVID-19 related social isolation or crises periods.
- Reform funding opportunities and strategic partnerships to effectively respond to increased needs for family violence services.
- Explore ongoing opportunities to co-design tailored policies and programs with multicultural youth to address issues within their communities, particularly during and post COVID-19.

Access to services

- Service delivery modules are transitioning from traditional service delivery to online modules – creating additional barriers to access for multicultural communities.
- Physical distancing and isolation measures impact service delivery, particularly creating barriers to accessing and supporting vulnerable cohorts.
- Family violence referral pathways have been fragmented during the transition to online service provision.
- There is a critical need for greater referral pathways to accessing emergency accommodation and family violence support services in regional/rural areas, particularly for multicultural communities during COVID-19.

National migration program & Temporary Visa Holders

- Providing equitable access to work entitlements for temporary visa holders.
- Reducing casualisation of workforce to improve job and long-term financial security.
- Providing clearer and more accessible pathways to permanent migration for temporary visa holders to improve settlement outcomes, preserve skills and knowhow, bolster the Australian economy and drive population growth.
- Increasing opportunities for family reunification to support migrants and refugees currently in Australia, particularly during COVID-19 recovery phase.
- Investigating trends in labour market to determine where skilled migrants can meet demands and fill skill shortages in during post COVID-19.
- Capitalising the resilience and invaluable contribution of migrants to rebuild a stronger economy.
- Creating more awareness about employment rights and responsibilities to protect temporary migrants from precarious work conditions.
- Ensuring that temporary migrants have adequate social protections from precarious work conditions, including underpayments in the workplace, exploitation and racism and discrimination.
- Adopting a human rights framework in migration policy making.
- Consulting temporary migrants to better understand the lived experience and compare with current migration and settlement policy expectations to reform structural barriers.
- Informing policy with learnings from the lived experience.
- Promoting and preserving our rich multicultural society, as one of Australia’s greatest assets.

Promote social cohesion and social capital to build community resilience, reduce racism and discrimination and celebrate our shared humanity.

Positive community feedback

- Increased cohesion and collaboration amongst community leaders in reaching out and supporting their communities.
- There is an opportunity for the community sector to collaborate and lead the way in supporting vulnerable multicultural communities.
- Many migrant and refugee communities have responded reasonably well to COVID-19 as they have experienced similar crises in their home countries.
- Many multicultural communities have used the lockdown period to re-connect and strengthen relationships with family and friends.
- Faith leaders have played a significant role in supporting communities spiritually throughout COVID-19 and lockdown period.
- Increased reports of community volunteerism to support vulnerable communities – an effective form of social capital to create bonds of trust and build resilience in critical times of need.

Critical issues

- Increased experiences of social isolation and disengagement as a result of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures, particularly impacting multicultural community groups unable to celebrate cultural and faith festivals.
- Overwhelming reports received on COVID-19 related racism and discrimination, particularly against people from Australian-Chinese backgrounds and Asian community.
- Frontline medical professionals experiencing increased COVID-19 related racism.
- Increased experiences of racism in public spaces impacting sense of safety and causing distress and fear.
- Increased reports of trauma, poor mental health and PTSD within refugee and asylum seeker communities who are seeking safety and security as they rebuild their lives in Australia.
- New arrivals without strong social support networks, people with disabilities and disengaged young people are disproportionately vulnerable as COVID-19 adds layers of complexities to issues impacting their lives.
- Inability to participate in sports and outdoor activities, including cultural dancing, community language and faith activities has disrupted social connectivity for many young people, exacerbating marginalisation and youth disengagement.
- Reports of increased intergenerational issues as families are living together during lockdown.
- Critical need to support multicultural LGBTIQ communities during COVID-19 and beyond with particular concern around increased family violence, poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes, increase in self-harm and marginalisation, with reports many young people having become unemployed and have returned to live with their families and 'return to the closet'.
- Some intersectionality cohorts don't have strong connections within their multicultural community group, particularly within LGBTIQ multicultural communities in facing complex issues around sexuality, religion, social norms etc additional layer of vulnerability.
- Provide dedicated funding for programs that build social connection and participation to support vulnerable cohorts throughout the recovery and re-integration processes.
- Use social media, the arts and technology to create more awareness about the impacts of COVID-19 related racism.
- Work with the Human Rights Commission and similar agencies to fight systemic racism, support reporting process and create awareness about the detrimental impact racism has on individuals and communities more broadly.
- Use technology to build social connections and increase participation – explore partnerships with community groups and provide necessary funding and devices.
- Increase online presence of good news stories relating to our shared lived experience COVID-19 and how communities have strengthened their social capital.

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