



George Street Neighbourhood Centre Association Inc.

Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

Presented to the *Joint Standing Committee on Migration*

The Secretary of the Committee

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Introduction

The Mackay region has experienced a great surge of cultural diversity over the last 10 years in particular due to employment opportunities. Recently, we have seen an increase in *international students* choosing to study in this region. Mackay also boasts having the largest *Australian South Sea Islander* community in Australia. Historically, the region's cane farming had attracted a large number of people from the *Maltese*, *Malay* and *Chinese* communities. We must also acknowledge how the Australian South Sea Islanders came to be in Australia and with this knowledge, we look back at how they have contributed to the sugarcane industry. Many of whom have stayed on and several generations now call Australia home. 10.5% of the region's residents are overseas born (ABS, 2006). The contributions of migrants to this region have created a sense of shared identity through similar experiences of settlement whether from overseas or interstate. George Street Neighbourhood Centre Assoc. Inc. (GSNC) has been successful with acquiring funding for a Multicultural Community Program (Funded by Queensland Department of Communities- Community Action for a Multicultural Society, CAMS) and the Migrant Settlement Program (Funded by the Department of Immigration & Citizenship, DIAC; Settlement Grants Program, SGP). These positions are funded part time, for 18 hours and 20 hours respectively. We anticipate that Minister Chris Bowen's announcement of a new Australian Multicultural Policy will bring greater awareness throughout the community of the importance of multiculturalism but also more opportunity for collaboration between all levels of government and culturally and linguistically (CALD) diverse community.

Terms of Reference

Settlement and participation.

1. Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees, that support their full participation integration into the broader Australian society.

The Migrant Settlement Program has seen an increase in demand for services such as workshops to assist newly arrived eligible migrants to settle in the region and individual case work. Majority of clients of this service require support to understand how to gain employment through training, education etc. However, living in regional Queensland poses other challenges such as limited public transport options and high cost of housing. We understand that for the majority of clients, they aim to be self sufficient and members who contribute to society. This enquiry should focus on appropriate funding for services in regional areas in order to address local issues that challenge positive settlement. In 2007, a Skilled Migration Sub-Committee was formed to identify gaps in service delivery. In 2009, we managed to gain funding to conduct a feasibility study for the establishment of a Welcome Centre for the region. The community was surveyed and results showed that a Welcome Centre or a one-stop-shop for people newly arrived to this region was positively supported. Discussions with the local Council and several businesses have provided good ideas however, funding is not available to establish such a centre. The vision for a Welcome Centre came about when we identified a gap where people newly arrived from interstate or overseas were not aware of services available to them. This is further highlighted when events of a natural disaster threaten community and CALD people are unsure of local

warnings and instructions and where to seek support. The expert knowledge of available services was also lacking from one service to another especially when there are different eligibility criteria for each program e.g. funded English classes were only for permanent residents and certain temporary visa holders. The Welcome Centre would be able to provide such information and support to access relevant services.

2. Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater social and economic benefits for Australian society as a whole.

A large percentage of families move to Australia due to work opportunities. In Mackay, we see many families on temporary work visas. It is often the case that dependents (in most instances it is the wife) are very isolated due to limited support to engage in social activities, employment, training and/or volunteering. The Australian State and Federal government must consider the assistance provided to dependents of temporary skilled migrants to access support services which will assist them to enter into skilled employment through attending training & education. E.g. The Participate in Prosperity (PIP) Program funded by the Queensland Department of Employment, Economic Development & Innovation (DEEDI) should be able to assist dependents of temporary skilled migrants so that they will be able to contribute positively to the community and economy. At present, the program target for the year is 35 participants. It is 6 months into the funding period and PIP is currently assisting 27 participants with 8 on the wait list. 40% of these participants have identified as CALD. English may also be another factor impacting on the type of employment available to these dependents. It is not uncommon to find an overseas qualified person employed in semi to low skilled jobs e.g. Experienced University lecturer is unable to obtain employment as a teacher aid at a primary school and is working as a receptionist. In regional Queensland, there are very limited options for English classes and the ones available are not accessible by certain temporary visa holders, hence resulting in underemployment. We know that that it is important that the whole family unit is settled positively in order for long term settlement to be achieved.

National productive capacity.

3. The role migration has played and contributes to building Australia's long term productive capacity.

Historically, this region has had a large number of migrant communities involved in the sugarcane industry. Many of the present cane farmers are descendents of these early settlers. E.g. many cane farming families have Maltese heritage. Queensland prides itself on the growth of the mining sector. Over the last 5 years, there has been a demand for boilermakers, fitters, turners, engineers, miners just to name a few without which, the sector would be experiencing greater shortage of skilled labour. Migrants sponsored to work in these jobs are highly skilled and relied on to support the industry to grow. This has a roll on effect where community infrastructure, jobs and other capacity building projects are supported by these companies which in turn influence the Australian economy. It is important for the Australian government to raise the awareness among employers and the community about the benefits of migration on the economy. One strategy would be to offer training and employment opportunities specifically for migrants with additional assistance such as increasing funding for community literacy classes.

There are several good examples that we can learn from the Indigenous Employment Programs through local councils and industry.

4. The profile of skilled migration to Australia and the extent to which Australia is fully utilising the skills of all migrants.

1400 subclass 457 visas were granted during the period of 2005- 2008 (ABS 2006). As the Central and North Queensland region grows, we are told of more infrastructure projects, greater demand on health services, growth in tourism and hospitality and increasing employment in the mining industry just to name a few. At present, these industries have relied on employing workers from overseas to fill the shortages. With the high cost of living in this area, dependents tend to enter into the workforce fairly quickly and fill gaps in certain sectors such as hospitality and aged care. Please note that these sectors are on the lower end of the award pay rate.

Underemployment seems to be increasing as the prospect of up-skilling to meet Australian standards is limited due to the high costs involved. Migrants in this situation are classed as international students and course fees are very high. Many of the dependants take on lower skilled jobs in hospitality and administration. There should be some assistance to dependents in order for them to maximise their full potential and contribute to the workforce. In Mackay, there are limited options for English classes so this is another barrier to gaining new skills. Funding for more English classes need to be considered in regions where there are limited services in the community.

Recommendations

1. The Australian State and Federal government to provide assistance to all dependents of temporary skilled migrants to access support services which will assist them to enter into skilled employment through attending training & education.
2. The Australian Government should support the establishment of community hubs (Welcome Centre) in regional areas where services to migrants are limited.
3. Increase funding for community English literacy classes.
4. Flexible eligibility criteria for English language classes that include dependents of temporary skilled migrants.
5. Funding to cover access to interpreters by funded non-government agencies.
6. Establishment of migrant employment programs to assist migrants to enter into specialised fields of employment.



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