Submission to the Multicultural Framework Review

October 2023

Acknowledgement of Country

SSI acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work. We pay respect to Elders past and present and recognise their continuous connection to Country.

About SSI

SSI appreciates the opportunity to make this submission to the Multicultural Framework Review. We commend the work of the Reviewers to date and especially their commitment to carrying out extensive consultations across the country to inform the Review.

SSI is a national non-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families, and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – including settlement support, disability programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other human services and geographical areas. For example, SSI has delivered programs to children and young people in statutory care since 2013, programs to people with disability since 2014 and employment support programs since 2015.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria, providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In FY2022, SSI supported nearly 50,000 clients across more than 49 programs and community-based services. We are also a leading provider of evidence-based insights into the social sector and are known as an organisation that can engage communities considered by many to be hard to reach.

SSI is well placed to provide input to the Multicultural Framework Review and would be happy to contribute further to later stages of the Review process.

Recommendations:

Key Recommendation: Australia does not currently have a Multicultural Framework and the pillars of an effective, robust Framework would include a clear statement of commitment, a legislative and policy architecture that underpins that commitment, a set of priority reform areas and action plans detailing how the Australian Government will achieve these reforms.

SSI has endorsed the *Community Sector Statement on the Multicultural Framework Review* developed by peaks FECCA and ACOSS and SCOA and the recommendations included in that Statement that support this key recommendation.

The following recommendations provide further detail on the pillars of a Multicultural Framework:

Recommendation 1: The Federal Government should establish a Federal Office for Multicultural Australia to ensure a renewed whole-of-government focus on multiculturalism. The Office would strengthen the multicultural access and equity policy and ensure mandatory implementation and reporting across all departments and agencies (including services that are outsourced). This should include development of consistent and accurate measures of cultural diversity.

Recommendation 2: The immigration and multicultural affairs portfolios should be represented by a minister in Cabinet.

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government should ensure that migration policy settings, including legislation and regulations, take account of the potential impacts on the future integration of newcomers, with a focus on strengthening access and equity across all government portfolios.

Recommendation 4: The Australian Government should invest in building the data and evidence-base for multicultural policy. Ideally, this investment would establish a stand-alone agency, such as the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, which existed until the mid-1990s.

Recommendation 5: Non-government organisations are integral to the social, cultural, economic and civic fabric of Australia. The multicultural and ethno-specific non-government sector has a vital role in supporting the implementation of this Review: driving the changes needed to advance a multicultural Australia; supporting a cohesive and inclusive society; and ensuring that policy settings are fit-for-purpose to harness the talents of all residents. Governments need to ensure the financial viability of these specialised organisations – small, medium and large – as they provide an essential element of the social infrastructure to carry forward the recommendations of this Review.

Recommendation 6: Given the extent of outsourcing of community services previously provided by governments, it is vital that a Multicultural Framework commits to the cultural responsiveness of all

government-funded services, whether these are provided directly by government, private or non-profit providers.

Recommendation 7: The Australian and state/territory governments should implement a revised Multicultural Access and Equity Policy Framework that is strong, transparent and includes mandated reporting and data collection from all government departments and agencies.

Recommendation 8: The Australian Government should work with multicultural organisations and community leaders to address barriers experienced by newcomers in accessing universal services. A cultural competency framework can provide the scaffolding for re-orienting policy and programs to achieve access and equity and better meet the needs of multicultural communities. This should include investment in provision of culturally responsive training for government agencies and service providers, including in regional areas, to enhance their capability to meet the needs of newcomers.

Recommendation 9: The Australian government should improve data collection and research on newcomer access to universal services to drive improvements in the planning and design of universal services. This should include disaggregated data for different cohorts of multicultural communities, for example by gender, disability, language background, to support specialised programs, where required, and work with state/territory governments to improve consistency across Australia.

Recommendation 10: The Australian and state/territory governments should work with industry and accreditation authorities to streamline processes for assessment and recognition of overseas qualifications and skills. This should include making it easier for newcomers to navigate the steps required to have their skills, qualifications (academic and trade) and prior learning recognised.

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Recommendation 13: Australia's multicultural policy and frameworks should facilitate the development of robust channels of two-way communication with multicultural communities underpinned by ongoing engagement and pro-active consultation with non-government organisations and multicultural community leaders (rather than only at the time of a crisis) to ensure that government communication is more effective. Ideally, this would be augmented in times of

critical need (such as a disaster or crisis) by facilitating and amplifying peer-to-peer community engagement and education within multicultural communities so that trusted networks are engaged to disseminate information.

Recommendation 14: Australia's Multicultural Framework should send a strong signal to multicultural and ethno-specific organisations to strengthen their efforts to promote a stronger understanding among multicultural communities of the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the First Peoples of Australia and play their part in reconciliation.

Recommendation 15: In recognition of the critical role of receiving communities in facilitating newcomer integration, the Federal and state/territory governments should value and resource community engagement initiatives led by multicultural and ethno-specific community organisations, that strengthen social, cultural and civic participation and exchange.

Recommendation 16: Australia's multicultural policy and frameworks should include a principle that newcomers have clear, fair, and timely pathways to citizenship as civic engagement and political voice are essential for them to thrive in Australia.

The effectiveness of existing federal legislative and regulatory frameworks, policy settings and programs and services designed to support multicultural Australia

As a country made up of a majority of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, multiculturalism is part of Australia's internationally recognised 'brand'. It is a key point of advantage and difference that helps attract newcomers, tourism and investment to our country.

However, current Commonwealth, state and territory governments adopt different approaches to multicultural policy, which contributes to blurred lines of government responsibility, ad-hoc data collection and reporting, and inconsistent approaches to ensuring that programs and services are culturally responsive to Australia's increasingly diverse population.

The Department of Home Affairs' Multicultural Access and Equity Policy seeks to build multicultural access and equity considerations into relevant policies and programs of all Commonwealth departments. It's intended to be a mechanism to address barriers to participation and ensure equity and inclusion. However, in recent times, there appears to have been decreasing commitment to multicultural access and equity across Commonwealth departments, and a decline in priority and in transparency of reporting.

This Review is a key opportunity for the Federal Government to go back to basic principles and reset the way that Australia approaches multiculturalism, first outlined in 1973 by Minister Grassby and followed by the landmark Galbally Report in 1978. These policy shifts had a positive impact on building a robust, resilient and more diverse civil society infrastructure including establishing a national Migrant Resource Centre program in areas of high newcomer arrivals.

We are now at a point where multiculturalism as a policy has evolved from strong foundations and needs a reset to advance a multicultural Australia.

Two examples, around the economic participation of migrant and refugee women (Box 1) and access by people with disability to the NDIS from culturally diverse backgrounds (Box 2), demonstrate the need for a more robust multicultural policy, driven by evidence and for multicultural affairs to be at the heart of Federal Government policies and programs.

Box 1: Unlocking the economic participation of migrant and refugee women

Research, *Untapped Potential*, commissioned by SSI and conducted by NATSEM at the University of Canberra found that refugee women and migrant women from low- and middle-income countries (i.e., non-OECD countries) are lagging behind other women in the Australian labour market, despite their relatively high level of skills, qualifications and motivation to work.

Analysis of labour market data shows that the proportion of overseas-born women in employment is lower, and unemployment generally higher, than for Australian-born women. Similarly, the participation rate (i.e., the proportion of working-age people in the labour force) is lower for women born overseas[1].

The research found that women born in low- and middle-income countries have much higher levels of graduate and post-graduate degrees compared to Australian-born women. Yet these women from low- and middle-income countries and refugee women, are more likely to be employed in low- skill and low-paid jobs that are not commensurate with their skills and qualifications[1].

Similarly, there is critical untapped potential in the labour market with refugee women and women from low- and middle-income countries who work part time more likely to want to work full time compared to all other women. For refugee women the results are very striking, with almost all part-time workers (95%) wanting to work full time[1].

These findings highlight the need for a more targeted policy response to unlock the economic potential of migrant and refugee women, which sees them as new entrants to the workforce. This should include, for example: subsidised entry into vocational and tertiary courses to bridge skills and qualifications gaps; careers advice; and opportunities for paid internships and structured mentorship pathways[2].

Box 2: Access by people with disability from CALD backgrounds to the NDIS

Ten years after its establishment, the uptake of the NDIS by people from CALD backgrounds continues to be much lower than the rest of the Australian population, despite similar rates of profound or severe disability. The NDIA projected that by 2019, around 20% of NDIS participants would be from CALD backgrounds[3]; however, in June 2023, the proportion of CALD participants entering and receiving an NDIS plan was only 8.6 per cent [4].

These lower levels of access to the NDIS are not related to lower levels of need but rather due to difficulties in navigating and accessing services that are culturally responsive. People from CALD backgrounds may experience multiple barriers to service usage such as: lack of accessible information; disability services not being culturally responsive to the needs of CALD communities; social isolation; lack of knowledge about a complex service system and lack of comparable service system in their home country; different cultural understandings of concepts such as disability and caring, and cultural stigma surrounding disability; and distrust of government agencies due to negative experiences in other countries[5].

The NDIA is currently developing a revised Cultural and Linguistic Cultural Diversity Strategy which is a welcome agency-level response. A multicultural framework that provides an overarching federal legislative and regulatory framework would support and elevate agency-led multicultural policy responses such as this NDIA initiative and support systemic change.

These are two examples of contemporary policy challenges against a backdrop of the Federal Government's current commitment to: address gender disparities in the Australian economy and society through a whole-of-government response; and to reorient the NDIS through a major review which is currently underway. In SSI's experience both examples point in different ways to barriers to social and economic inclusion for people from multicultural backgrounds and the potential for a Multicultural Framework to advance access and equity.

Additionally, as noted in the recent Migration Review, Australia does not have a way to "assess the success of the migration [program's] success or otherwise [p.36]"[6]. Similarly, Australia is constrained in terms of being able to assess the effectiveness of existing Federal legislative and policy frameworks and programs designed to support multicultural Australia. We currently do not have

accurate and consistent disaggregated data to shine a light on disparities – positive and negative - across different cohorts of multicultural communities. This gap is also acknowledged in Treasury's recent *Measuring What Matters* framework, which aims to assess how, as a country, we can make progress to improve wellbeing outcomes[7]. *Measuring What Matters* acknowledges that "aggregate indicators can, at times, mask different experiences and outcomes for different groups of people in our society. Recognising this, indicators and metrics have been disaggregated by age, gender, ethnicity (including for First Nations people), where *reliable data is available* to highlight distributional differences" p.14 [7].

In reality, data on cultural diversity is poorly defined and poorly collected in Australia. As noted by FECCA in the *Advancing Multicultural Australia Policy Platform* there is a need to design and implement consistent and accurate measures of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity across whole of government data collection systems[8].

Further, a dedicated research entity funded by the Commonwealth could generate evidence to guide all aspects of multicultural policy, supporting greater analysis across immigration and census datasets and making them more accessible to other researchers. This could also include providing research outputs, that document policy outcomes for different cohorts (e.g., by language background, women, people with disability, LGBTIQA+) and jurisdictions (e.g., national, State/Territory and LGAs). Ideally this investment would be in the form of a stand-alone agency such as existed in the past through the Bureau of Immigration and Population Research. This would bring Australia into line with the data capabilities and research capabilities that we observe being deployed by Statistics Canada (see for example, [Immigrants and Non-Permanent Residents Statistics](#))

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Roles and functions of government and non-government organisations

Governments have a central role in nurturing a positive social climate towards cultural diversity and multiculturalism. This positive climate can emphasise common ground between communities of different backgrounds, and between city and country, to ensure that no segment of the population feels left behind.

Governments should seek to create a sense of belonging by granting residents, regardless of visa type, equal access to fundamental rights and opportunities. A sense of belonging, particularly among newcomers, grows from being treated equally and having equal rights, being able to fulfil aspirations through social mobility, which engenders hope for the future and prosperity for the next generation. However, in response to COVID-19 many residents in Australia, particularly temporary migrants, were effectively abandoned and denied access to almost all safety nets and emergency supports at a time of extreme need and uncertainty.

Non-government organisations are an important element of a functioning democracy and are vital to the social, cultural, economic and civic fabric of Australia. These organisations include a range of multicultural and ethno-specific non-government organisations which provide funded and non-funded support to newcomers and multicultural communities more broadly. Operating at the front line, they are among the best sources of information about what works (as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic discussed below) to tackle social and other challenges and are well-positioned to give voice to multicultural communities in society.

They are also well positioned to contribute to public policy debates through various forms of advocacy. This can be an effective strategy to achieve long-lasting, systemic change through: tackling the root causes rather than the symptoms of an issue; supporting the public interest and balancing out private interests; and enhancing the impact of "on the ground" activities based on the lived experience of multicultural communities.

In recent decades policy shifts have resulted in governments outsourcing the delivery of many human services to non-government organisations and private entities. In SSI's experience, the results of this in terms of multicultural communities have been mixed and have arguably been associated with a reduction in specialised and tailored engagement and support for multicultural communities, even in geographical areas where multicultural communities make up a significant part or the majority of the population.

The mismatch is illustrated in a recent tender for Workforce Australia employment services which did include specialised services for 'CALD' and 'refugee' cohorts. However, the only three 'refugee' licenses were issued across Australia and the 10 'CALD' licenses issued were in various locations across Australia that did not match local population demographics.

In contrast, there are examples of programs that have embedded responsiveness to the local population as a core element to improve engagement with 'hard-to-reach' communities, across all phases from program design, through to tender specifications, program establishment, and program implementation and evaluation phases (Box 3).

Box 3: Learning from the Ability Links NSW model

Ability Links NSW was established in 2014 as the NSW Government approach to engage people with disability, their families and carers prior to the national rollout of the NDIS. A related program, Early Links, supported children with disability.

The target group for Ability Links and Early Links, staffed by Linkers, was people with disability aged 0 to 64 to address their goals and aspirations for inclusion in their local community or through accessing mainstream services. Linkers had three main roles:

- to work with people with disability, their families and carers to plan for their future.
- to help people with disability become more confident, build on their strengths, and support them to achieve their goals by building new networks and accessing support and services in their community.
- to work alongside communities and mainstream services, supporting them to become more welcoming and inclusive of people with disability [9].

The design of the program encouraged providers to employ Linkers that reflected the local population demographics (including multicultural communities) and the tender criteria that specified organisations demonstrating their responsiveness to the local population. SSI successfully tendered for the program and was one of the largest providers of Ability Links, delivering the program in highly culturally diverse locations across Western and South-Western Sydney.

SSI commissioned an independent evaluation[10] of the delivery of Ability Links which found that 64% of SSI's Ability Links individual outcomes were with CALD people, which represented 75% of the NSW statewide program outcomes for CALD participants. It found that the strong performance of SSI's Ability Links with CALD participants was supported by the design of the Ability Links program, which was flexible, holistic, and free of cost with no upfront barriers in terms of diagnosis. Stakeholders attributed the culturally competent elements of the program, including SSI Linkers being bilingual, from diverse backgrounds and connected to their communities, as key to supporting outcomes through participants and Linkers having a shared understanding to quickly build trusting relationships to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers.

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Identifying areas for reform to address systemic barriers that prevent multicultural communities from fully participating in Australian society, including racism and discrimination

Evidence of disparities that point to systemic barriers between locally born populations in OECD countries and newcomers is widespread [11] . Australia has an opportunity through the recommendations and actions from this Review to be a leader in addressing these disparities which are often evident in access to universal services.

In the context of Australia's increasing diversity, equitable access to services and information is more important than ever to ensure all people can actively participate in their community and fully engage in a fair and inclusive society. One of the most significant strategies for improving newcomers' long-term prospects is providing access to universal services and rights. However, newcomers to Australia continue to face a range of barriers in accessing universal services such as health, education (see Box 3), employment (see Box 1), housing, disability (see Box 2) and justice services.

Box 3: Developmental trajectories for children from culturally diverse backgrounds in Australia

In 2021, SSI commissioned the Telethon Kids Institute to analyse data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) – a nationwide census of children starting school over four time points 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018. The findings on child development in *Stronger Starts Brighter Futures* [12] pointed to:

- Children from CALD backgrounds were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry than non-CALD children, as measured by the AEDC. This was consistent across all four national cohorts of children from 2009 to 2018, though the gap has narrowed over time. However, the number of children from CALD backgrounds who are developmentally vulnerable continues to increase in line with increasing cultural diversity in the Australian population.
- There are marked gaps in early childhood education and care attendance between children from CALD and non-CALD backgrounds at a national level and the impact of these differences in participation is evident in the developmental trajectories of children who attend preschool: 1 in 5 children from CALD backgrounds who attend preschool are developmentally vulnerable compared to 1 in 3 children who do not attend preschool.
- Overall, children from CALD backgrounds in Australia who do not attend any type of early childhood education and care are 1.8 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, compared to those who attend.

Barriers to universal services include cultural barriers, such as fear of engagement with authorities; structural barriers, such as lack of interpreter services; and service-related barriers, such as a workforce lacking the relevant cultural knowledge or language skills. Improving access to universal services, therefore, requires change at multiple levels including government policies, organisational policies and practice, and staff training and development[13]. In addition, as discussed later, staffing at all levels of universal services should better reflect the cultural diversity of Australia.

SSI recommends drawing on a cultural competency framework as a critical part of a Multicultural Framework to address barriers which promotes change: at the systems level (government policy settings); professional level (through professional standards); provider level (through organisational or agency policies); and for individual workers. This approach echoes the framework adopted by the NHMRC in a comprehensive review[13] and recently recommended in a report by the UNSW SPRC and the National Ethnic Disability Alliance, commissioned by the Disability Royal Commission, into best-practice access to services for people with disability from CALD backgrounds [14]. A cultural competency framework can provide the scaffolding for re-orienting policies and programs to better meet the needs of multicultural communities in Australia.

This should include a focus on strengthening cultural competency of workers to engage and support people from culturally diverse backgrounds. While many services seek to respond to cultural diversity, they often need support with skill development to ensure that they are culturally responsive to the needs and preferences of diverse communities.

Settlement providers such as SSI have deep knowledge and experience in working with diverse communities and are well placed to provide culturally responsive training. For example, SSI's Culture-Ready training was developed and delivered to build the skills and cultural responsiveness of the NDIS workforce. During 2021, the program delivered 240 workshops across all states and territories. In the evaluation, workers reported increased understanding of issues to consider when supporting people with disability from diverse backgrounds. In the 3-month follow up surveys, workers reported changes to their practice, including providing access to translated documents, increased use of the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) and adapting processes and policies[15].

Other systemic barriers to full participation in society include the long-standing and well-documented barriers in the skills and qualifications recognition system (Box 4). In Australia, discussion of migration as a response to labour and skills shortages often focus on policies to increase the number of migrants coming to the country, largely ignoring the untapped potential of migrants and refugees already here who may be unemployed, underemployed, or working in positions well below their skill and qualification level (Box 1).

Box 4: A systemic issue - the 'broken' skills and qualifications recognition system (adapted from BDB)

In 2006, the Productivity Commission described Australia's skills assessment and recognition scheme as complex, time-consuming and bureaucratic. Little has changed since then[16]. For too many skilled migrants, their motivation to live and work in Australia is quickly replaced by the stress of navigating a fragmented recognition system of more than 34 authorities spanning 450 occupations [17]. This complexity puts off many migrants from applying for recognition altogether. Between 2006 and 2016, only 39 per cent of migrants with post-school qualifications applied to go through the recognition process [18].

The difficulty in having qualifications and skills recognised in Australia means many skilled refugees and migrants are resorting to jobs well below their skill level. This isn't just holding back refugees and migrants; it is holding back our economy. Research by CEDA has found that one in four permanent skilled migrants work beneath their qualification and skill level [18].

SSI's recently launched *Billion Dollar Benefit* report[19] highlights that we know what works from international and domestic experience. Up until 2015, Australia's Assessment Subsidy for Overseas Trained Professionals (ASDOT) played an important role in funding overseas professionals through the costly recognition process. A one-stop-shop for recognition information like the 'Recognition in Germany' portal would be another step in the right direction. Germany's multilingual portal includes an innovative 'recognition finder' tool where applicants enter their profession and city to automatically receive tailored, step-by-step information on how to get their skills recognised. Within four years of the portal being launched, the number of applications for foreign skills recognition in Germany more than doubled [20]. Further, an oversight body like Ontario's (Canada) Office of the Fairness Commissioner would help ensure recognition procedures are fair, transparent, consistent and accessible.

As noted earlier, multiculturalism is part of Australia's internationally recognised 'brand' and is a key point of advantage and difference that helps attract newcomers, tourism and investment to our country. For example, multiculturalism was a significant feature of Australia's successful bid for the upcoming Brisbane Olympic Games.

Conversely, experiences of racism and discrimination have the potential to undermine Australia's 'brand' and undermine social cohesion. The Mapping Social Cohesion survey, conducted annually by the Scanlon Foundation, has found wide support for multiculturalism. However, discrimination and prejudice towards people from different backgrounds persist – and the percentage of people reporting experiences of racial discrimination has almost doubled from 9 per cent in 2007 to 16 per cent in 2022[21]. The survey has also found a 'hierarchy of preference' in the Australian community continues with higher levels of negative sentiment towards Muslims and people immigrating from non-European countries.

This underscores the critical importance of the work being led by the Australian Human Rights Commission to develop a national anti-racism strategy. This Review can support and expand upon this work which must be grounded in the experience and knowledge of people who experience racism in Australia including First Nations people and newcomers. Anti-racism initiatives should address both inter-personal and systemic racism and SSI welcomes the funding announced in federal budget to support the work being progressed by the Australian Human Rights Commission.

The digital transformation of the past 30 years has resulted in digital inclusion becoming critical to social and economic inclusion. The emerging evidence suggests that many newcomers are adept at using digital technology to maintain social and family ties but there are gaps in terms of the digital skills in terms of accessing essential services and education (Box 5). Multicultural policy needs to encompass digital inclusion to address the risk of systemic barriers resulting from various form of digital exclusion among multicultural communities.

Box 5: Digital inclusion: a new and contemporary systemic barrier
The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to digital modes of service delivery and highlighted he critical importance of digital access and literacy in all aspects of people's lives. This has exacerbated digital exclusion for some groups, including migrants and refugees, creating a barrier to accessing reliable – and often critical – information, health and government services. Over three years, SSI's *Foundations for Belonging research*

conducted in partnership with Western Sydney University, with newly arrived refugees has found that difficulties in using technology is one of the most common barriers, alongside language difficulties, to accessing government services[22]. The research also revealed a gap in skills and confidence in using digital technology, particularly for refugee women and older age groups.

This highlights the need to ensure that the digital transformation of government and other services is anchored by policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers. Government agencies and service providers should pay particular attention to building digital gateways (i.e., websites, apps) that are more intuitive – with less need for digital skills – and that also minimise language barriers (i.e., in-language, plain English). Strengthening the digital skills of newcomers should also be prioritised, while other options are required for people who are unable to access digital services.

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language, plain English). Increased investment is also needed in initiatives that support newcomers to build skills and confidence in using digital technology.

The effectiveness of current federal diversity, equity and inclusion strategies, including the promotion of people from CALD backgrounds into leadership roles

Current federal diversity, equity and inclusion strategies are an important and necessary element of systemic change. However, their effectiveness is challenged since we currently do not have an overarching multicultural policy at the heart of government. As outlined previously, current Commonwealth, state and territory governments adopt different approaches to multicultural policy, which contributes to blurred lines of government responsibility, ad-hoc data collection and reporting, and inconsistent approaches to ensuring that programs and services are culturally responsive to Australia's increasingly diverse population. Diversity, equity and inclusion strategies are unlikely to flourish in this context.

In addition, the effectiveness of diversity, equity and inclusion strategies is challenged by the realities of intersectionality (e.g., gender, sexuality, disability, age) in society. If an initiative is focussed on inclusion in terms of one group (e.g., equity in terms of women's economic participation (Box 1)) it can follow that inclusion strategies in that area (i.e., gender) may have limited outcomes for multicultural women (i.e., where gender _and_ cultural and linguistic diversity are both needing equal consideration). One of the key changes since multiculturalism was introduced in Australia 50 years ago is that we now appreciate more fully intersectional issues. Consequently, multiculturalism and multicultural policy needs a more intersectional approach than in the past. A robust Multicultural Framework would provide the scaffolding needed for stronger diversity, equity and inclusion strategies across government, the non-government sector and business that can respond to intersectionality through ensuring that lived experience is at the heart of policy and program design.

Greater representation and visibility of people from culturally diverse backgrounds is also critical, for example, through more diverse representation in the media, the arts, politics and business leadership. This can help to support the systemic change that is at the heart of this Review and help bolster the sense of belonging to Australia among people from culturally diverse backgrounds. For example, new research _Sense of belonging among multilingual audiences in Australia_ by the University of Canberra, commissioned by SBS, has found that the more audiences feel represented in the news, the more likely they are to trust the news [23]. Multilingual audiences who feel represented in the news are more likely to feel a sense of belonging; and those who feel they belong, in turn, are more willing to participate and engage in Australian society [23].

We also need greater cultural diversity at all levels of government services. This is especially important in times of crisis, such as during the pandemic. A comprehensive, independent review into Australia's response to the pandemic led by the Paul Ramsay Foundation attributed the lack of cultural diversity in the public sector as a key factor in failings to reach multicultural communities[24]

(discussed in more detail below). In one of six recommendations, the review highlighted the need to enhance public service collaboration, capability and communication with a specific focus to "increase the diversity of the public sector to ensure it reflects Australian society"[24], p. 7.

How the Federal Government can more strategically communicate and engage with multicultural Australia, including in languages other than English

Prior to the pandemic Federal Government tailored and targeted communication with multicultural Australia had diminished alongside the decreasing priority accorded to multicultural access and equity considerations. The pandemic highlighted to the Federal Government (and indeed all governments) that communication and engagement channels with all sections of the community need to be robust and healthy at all times, so that they can be readily deployed in a crisis (Box 6). Governments have a critical role to deliver tailored information regardless of cultural or linguistic backgrounds, age, gender, visa category or recency of arrival in Australia; use a range of communication channels that are appropriate and accessible to multicultural communities (e.g., social media (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp); and draw on 'traditional' ethnic language print, radio and TV media[25]. Provision of resources in audio, visual (e.g., pictographs, which have minimal or no text) and video formats is crucial to reach people who are not literate in their preferred first language [25,26].

Box 6: Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed major gaps in government communication and engagement with multicultural communities. Communication with CALD communities was initially problematic with major negative impacts on health and social outcomes. CALD communities felt that they were not trusted to follow health directives as occurred in Melbourne, when several public housing towers, with a significant proportion of residents from CALD backgrounds, were locked down by the authorities. Lack of engagement with multicultural communities eroded trust between communities and governments, leading to poor reach and support for diverse communities. Communication issues were exacerbated by rapidly changing advice from government and the spread of misinformation.

In contrast, communication with CALD communities in later stages of the pandemic was successful because it was supported by settlement providers, multicultural and ethnos-specific organisations and CALD community leaders sharing information with newly arrived communities. These organisations played a critical role in facilitating engagement between government and communities and were proactive in engaging with communities, addressing misinformation and played a critical role in garnering community support for important health behaviours such as physical distancing and testing. They engaged health experts that were able to share information in-language in ways that were best suited to their communities. Many focused their efforts on older people as they were less likely to have the skills or confidence to use digital technology to obtain information.

The independent review into Australia's response to the pandemic led by the Paul Ramsay Foundation called for: "National Cabinet should expand and improve the channels of public communication, particularly with those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. With this in mind, all governments should increase the diversity of public sector employees" [24] p. 13.

Recommendation 13: Australia's multicultural policy and frameworks should facilitate the development of robust channels of two-way communication with multicultural communities underpinned by ongoing engagement and pro-active consultation with non-government organisations and multicultural community leaders (rather than only at the time of a crisis) to ensure that government communication is effective. Ideally, this would be augmented in times of critical need (such as a disaster or crisis) by facilitating and amplifying peer-to-peer community engagement and education within multicultural communities so that trusted peers are engaged to disseminate information.

Opportunities to define a modern shared Australian identity and strengthen public understanding of multiculturalism as a collective responsibility and strategies to promote multiculturalism, social cohesion and inclusion

Cultural and linguistic diversity is inextricably woven into Australia's identity with over 250 languages spoken prior to European colonisation and these First Nations peoples have had continuous connection and custodianship to this land for over 60,000 years. This reality should be a central tenet of a future Multicultural Framework. Newcomers to Australia often come from homelands with their own cultural, linguistic and spiritual connections to land. Understanding the similar, yet different histories and issues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and newcomers share can be the basis for a respectful recognition of Australia's First Peoples among multicultural communities.

Box 7: Creating the foundations for inclusion and reconciliation

SSI's *Foundations for Belonging* research conducted in partnership with Western Sydney University aims to extend the understanding of refugee settlement through gathering the perspectives of refugees as they navigate a new chapter of their lives in Australia. The most recent phase of the research, conducted in early 2023, explored refugees' understanding and engagement with First Nations issues and histories in Australia, builds on three earlier phases of *Foundations for Belonging* published from 2020 to 2022.

The [latest research](#)[27] found that similarities and differences between First Nations' histories, and refugees' histories and the land on which they are resettled, allow refugees to share aspects of their cultural insecurity and vulnerability, particularly when First Nations' histories are shared from a strengths-based approach highlighting Aboriginal ways of being by First Nations Australians. In addition, refugees' knowledge of the continuity and endurance of Australia's First Nations peoples and cultures imbue refugees, with a sense of cultural safety and continuity of their own traditions in the face of dominant Western 'settler' narratives in Australia[26].

The research provides evidence that initiatives by multicultural and ethno-specific organisations, including settlement providers, can further reconciliation and foster a stronger sense of belonging in multicultural communities through increasing engagement between newcomers and Australia's First Nations peoples.

In Australia, multiculturalism to date has been underpinned by a principle which seeks to support newcomers to integrate and participate, rather than placing the onus on newcomers to assimilate. Support for multiculturalism has been both political and institutional through a set of policies and programs - though this support has eroded in recent decades. That said, public sentiment around multiculturalism, as measured by the Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion research, shows continuing majority support among the Australian public for immigration, and even stronger support for multiculturalism[21]. The research indicates agreement – of about 8 in 10 - that multiculturalism has been good for Australia and, importantly, that most Australian residents understand multiculturalism as a two-way process of change, requiring adaptation by Australians and newcomers[21].

Relatedly, the emergence of transnationalism presents this Review with an opportunity to re-think our visions of multiculturalism and a shared Australian identity. Transnationalism refers to people maintaining ties and interactions with people or institutions across borders and nations. Contemporary migrants and refugees often maintain ties to their countries of origin while they are building a life in Australia. Transnationalism has been enabled by lower-cost air travel and the interconnectedness of a digital world where increasingly, social life takes place across borders, even as the political and cultural element of nation-state boundaries of the past remain strong and continue to evolve[28]. This transnational reality demands fresh thinking on what multiculturalism means and what a shared Australian identity could be in the 21st century.

Conceptual understandings of what can be done to improve newcomer integration have progressed substantially since the late 1970s when Australia took significant steps towards multiculturalism. Research in contexts that are like Australia, including the influential Framework of Integration[29] emphasise the multidimensional and multidirectional nature of integration; a shared responsibility for integration that includes refugees, receiving communities and government at all levels; and foregrounds access to rights, security and equality and the need to contribute and fulfil responsibilities[29]. A renewed focus on multiculturalism can facilitate newcomers to fulfil these responsibilities. We also need to be mindful of the role of receiving communities in shaping newcomer integration and notions of belonging (Box 8).

Box 8: The role of receiving communities in multiculturalism and integration

In Armidale, NSW, joint research conducted by the University of New England and SSI over four years found growing positive sentiment toward refugee settlement in the town, likely due to strong investment by SSI in community engagement initiatives.[30] SSI's approach to community engagement is underpinned by five key pillars: consulting with and harnessing the voice of newcomers; strong engagement with key stakeholders such as civic leaders and local government; fostering inclusion and belonging; and encouraging involvement of volunteers[31]. Social connections can provide a foundation for two-way intercultural dialogue to address community concerns, allay prejudice and discrimination and build understanding around shared

aspirations[30]. As part of our community engagement initiatives, SSI facilitates cultural activities and events that provide newcomers with opportunities to contribute to the cultural fabric of the local community through artistic expression[32].

Successful multicultural policy and integration matters because it helps newcomers to realise their full potential, makes it easier for them to access services and reduces educational, health and economic inequalities[29]. In turn, a country's approach to multiculturalism and integration also shapes how newcomers feel about their new country — integration policies are one of the strongest factors shaping migrants' sense of belonging and civic participation. [33] Australia's approach to integration also matters because the way that countries treat newcomers underpins social cohesion and inclusion. Inclusive policies create a 'virtuous circle' of integration that promotes openness and interaction. Newcomers and the public are more likely to interact with and think of each other as equals in countries where inclusive policies treat immigrants as equals and invest in integration as an opportunity for society. Inclusive policies set the tone for positive attitudes and interactions between newcomers and the broader community, and nurture an overall sense of belonging, wellbeing and trust. Conversely, restrictive policies create a 'vicious circle' of exclusion that reinforce fear and division within the community[31].

Evidence indicates the importance of starting integration efforts early and sustaining momentum over the longer term.[34] It can take several years for newcomers, especially refugees, to adjust to a new context, with social, civic and economic participation likely to fluctuate during early years of settlement.[35] Focusing on integration over the longer term is key to yielding the long-term dividends of multicultural Australia.

Access to citizenship is an important step for newcomers to share the rights and responsibilities of other Australians. Permanent residents (except for some UK and New Zealand citizens) are not eligible to vote and cannot work in the Commonwealth public service or the Australian Defence Force. Currently, newcomers need to wait four years before they can apply for citizenship – despite having already met the stringent requirements for permanent residency. About half of all people gaining permanent residency each year have been temporarily resident in Australia for many years.[36] While specific policy in relation to citizenship is outside of the scope of this Review, multicultural policy should facilitate civic participation in all its forms for newcomers. In this way, Australia can maintain high rates of citizenship uptake among newcomers. After all, citizenship signifies their commitment to fulfil responsibilities and fully participate in Australia's economic, social, civil and cultural life.

Box 9: Access to citizenship

Maintaining high rates of citizenship uptake among newcomers is important, as citizenship is a marker of newcomers' full and active participation in their adopted country, involving legal and other responsibilities as well as rights. For many newcomers, citizenship is symbolic of acceptance by the Australian community.

In contrast to Australia, New Zealand and Canada both have a clear and timely path to citizenship. Notably, New Zealand is a world leader in granting equal opportunity for political participation to newcomers with

citizens and permanent residents granted the right to vote in all elections after one year's residence. Civic engagement and a political voice are essential for newcomers to thrive [34].

Recommendation 14: Australia's Multicultural Framework should send a strong signal to multicultural and ethno-specific organisations to strengthen their efforts to promote a stronger understanding among multicultural communities of the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the First Peoples of Australia and play their part in reconciliation.

Recommendation 15: In recognition of the critical role of receiving communities in facilitating newcomer integration, the Federal and state/territory governments should value and resource community engagement initiatives led by multicultural and ethno-specific community organisations, that strengthen social, cultural and civic participation and exchange.

Recommendation 16: Australia's multicultural policy and frameworks should include a principle that newcomers have clear, fair, and timely pathways to citizenship as civic engagement and political voice are essential for them to thrive in Australia.

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Date: 13 October 2023

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