

Settlement Council of Australia

Suite 3a,
32 Thesiger Court,
Deakin, ACT 2600

e: info@scoa.org.au
w: www.scoa.org.au



Multiculturalism alive and well in Australia

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Understanding the role that migrants and humanitarian entrants play in the broader Australian community is crucial to developing a proper understanding of their settlement journeys.

The focus of discussions around settlement is often on the economic integration of migrants in Australia; with respect to employment outcomes, education opportunities and socio-economic factors such as housing, transport and English Language training. However, settlement is a much bigger picture and each of these factors must be considered as building blocks. Each is an important foundation for successful settlement, but none can be considered individually to accurately gauge a recent arrival's level of settlement in Australia.¹

Two other interrelated building blocks that must be considered are a migrant or former refugee's social engagement and their levels of civic participation. While these are much harder to measure than specific economic and socio-economic outcomes, they are not only an essential element of building a sense of belonging for newly arrived migrants but are also crucial for successful long-term settlement.

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) therefore welcomes efforts, such as the recently released Scanlon Foundation report "Mapping Social Cohesion".² This report, as part of a series of publications produced by Scanlon Foundation, provides valuable insights and commentary on social cohesion and civic participation in an Australian context and helps us understand the settlement experience of migrants and former refugees.

Australia's embrace: Multiculturalism and Integration

Concepts of integration and engagement are a mutual process, requiring both migrants and the receiving community to commit to inclusive and common practices and values, without precluding the celebration and practice of one's own culture.³ This process leads to successful settlement outcomes and fosters a harmonious and cohesive multicultural society.

¹ This view is supported by the OECD in its 2015 publication "Indicators of Immigrant Integration: Settling In" p19.

² Scanlon Foundation (2016) "Mapping Social Cohesion" accessible at http://scanlonfoundation.org.au/research_surveys/2016/

³ This is a concept that has been given considerable consideration by the European Council, when it adopted its Common Basic Principles on Immigrant Integration in 2004. See http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/common-basic-principles_en.pdf (accessed on 28 November 2016).

Across the political divide the concept of multiculturalism is heralded in Australia as a success story of global significance. This was recently reinforced by Prime Minister Turnbull when he said:

We are the most successful and harmonious multicultural society in the world. Our multicultural success is at the heart of our national identity. It is intrinsic to our history and our character.
– Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, 16 June 2016

Similar pronouncements can be found across Australia's recent history. In October 2016 both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, Mr Shorten, backed a bipartisan motion in parliament supporting Australia's cultural diversity. The motion recognised Indigenous people, refugees and Muslims, reaffirmed the commitment to equal rights, a non-discriminatory immigration policy, reconciliation and multiculturalism and denounced racism.⁴

While SCoA welcomes positive developments such as this, we note that there is, at the same time, an increasingly loud, but relatively small group of dissenters who claim to be representing the concerns of an unknown number of "unheard" Australians. These dissenters question the effectiveness of Australia's multicultural policy, and argue for restrictions to immigration, among other actions.⁵ Some of these views were given greater credibility as a result of an Essential Poll in September 2016 which reported that 49% of Australians were in favour of a ban on Muslim Immigration.⁶

In this context, SCoA welcomes any efforts to provide a clear and cogent snapshot of the attitudes of the broader Australian community with respect to these important notions. We therefore thank the Scanlon Foundation for its 2016 Mapping Social Cohesion report ("Report"), released on 22 November 2016.⁷ The Report presents the results of the Foundation's 2016 probability-based survey of 1500 Australians and provides a timely and insightful snapshot of the values and opinions held across a cross-section of the Australian community. It is the 9th report of this nature conducted by the Foundation since 2007 and so also serves as a great indication of how opinions have changed (or not) over that period.

What do Australians really think about Immigration and Multiculturalism?

SCoA is comforted by the positive picture the Report presents of Australia's views on multiculturalism and immigration. Australia has a strong track record of successfully settling refugees and migrants and assisting their integration into the broader community. SCoA considers that this success is responsible for the continuing high levels of support nationally for multiculturalism which are identified in the Report. In 2016 that level of support sits at 83%,⁸ a clear indication that our country is largely welcoming and supportive of the diverse mixture of cultures it currently enjoys.

⁴ Sydney Morning Herald (10 October 2016) "As Donald Trump questioned Muslims, Turnbull and Shorten did something remarkable" accessible at <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/as-donald-trump-questioned-muslims-turnbull-and-shorten-did-something-remarkable-20161010-gryqxy.html> (accessed on 29 November 2016).

⁵ See, for example, Senator Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to the Australian Parliament in 2016, accessible via ABC News: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-15/pauline-hanson-maiden-speech-2016/7847136> (accessed on 29 November 2016).

⁶ Essential Media Communications (21 September 2016) "Ban on Muslim immigration" accessible at <http://www.essentialvision.com.au/ban-on-muslim-immigration> (accessed on 29 November 2016).

⁷ Scanlon Foundation (2016) "Mapping Social Cohesion" accessible at http://scanlonfoundation.org.au/research_surveys/2016/

⁸ See Report, page 54.

Similarly, Australians exhibit strong support for our immigration programme. The Report notes the lowest levels of concern in its history,⁹ with the majority of Australians expressing that the rate of immigration is “about right” or “too low”.¹⁰ It is of interest to note that this ranks Australia globally as the nation most supportive of its immigration intake.¹¹

There is also very strong support for Australia’s humanitarian program (approximately 80%¹²) suggesting that Australians are well aware of the global refugee crisis and the important role that Australia can play as a global citizen in this arena. It is worth noting, however, that this high level of support is largely contingent on the orderly and process-driven selection of humanitarian entrants. For asylum seekers arriving by boat, the Report confirms that a majority of over 60% “disapprove” – a response that has not changed considerably over the duration of the surveys.¹³

On a more positive note, and again reinforcing the general view that Australians support a structured approach to humanitarian assistance, a majority (58%) of Australians support the government's plan to bring refugees from the Syrian conflict to Australia,¹⁴ and almost 70% support the view that there should be equal consideration for refugees of all religious and ethnic groups.

These statistics paint a very positive view of the general population’s acceptance of immigration and the country’s welcoming and compassionate approach to refugees and humanitarian entrants, though this welcoming attitude is dependent on the requirement that migration processes be well-managed.

Notwithstanding these positive indications, SCoA notes that the level of negativity towards Muslims sits at 24 per cent – a figure that has been fairly consistent across recent years.¹⁵ This can be contrasted against the Essential Poll’s 49% reported in September 2016,¹⁶ an outcome that the Report’s author explains as being a result of the differences in the method of polling conducted by the two.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this highlights one of the prevailing issues for multicultural Australia in the twenty-first century.

What are the experiences of migrants and refugees in Australia?

In addition to considering the Australian community’s willingness to embrace multiculturalism, the Scanlon Foundation has provided insights into migrants’ and refugees’ experiences of life in Australia, both in the Report discussed above, and also in its larger survey report, released earlier in 2016, *Australians Today*.¹⁸ *Australians Today* provides the results of a comprehensive survey conducted by the Foundation in 2015: *Australia@2015*.

One of the best indicators of social cohesion and integration provided in *Australians Today* is its findings that 62% of recently arrived migrants and refugees¹⁹ report being happy with their life in

⁹ Report, page 2.

¹⁰ Report, page 39.

¹¹ Report, page 40.

¹² Report, page 49.

¹³ Report, page 46.

¹⁴ Report, page 49.

¹⁵ Report, page 43.

¹⁶ See above note 6.

¹⁷ Report, page 41.

¹⁸ Scanlon Foundation (2016), *Australians Today*.

¹⁹ Defined in *Australians Today* as those who have arrived since 2001.

Australia, while just 13% report being unhappy.²⁰ When the survey limited its participants to only Humanitarian entrants, the level of happiness rose to 64%.²¹

On the subject of satisfaction, Australians Today reports that 76% of recently arrived migrants and refugees report being satisfied with their life in Australia.²²

These results highlight the positive influence on migrants and refugees that the broader community's willingness to welcome them can have. SCoA strongly believes that it also demonstrates the successes of the settlement sector in assisting newly arrived migrants and refugees. Effective delivery of settlement services adds to the store of social capital both within and between migrant and refugee communities and the wider society – and this is clearly reflected in these results.

However, SCoA is concerned by the increase in reported experiences of discrimination based on skin colour, ethnic origin or religion that has been reported in the 2016 Mapping Social Cohesion Report. A response rate of 20% is the highest in the Survey's 10 year history.²³

Such negativity can have a devastating impact on individuals and impacts the chances of achieving a successful settlement. For this reason, SCoA urges our country's politicians, who set the tone for mainstream debate, to provide a model of positive non-discriminatory behaviour. In the absence of such, SCoA is concerned that divisive discourse will further exacerbate these problems at the community level.

Where to from here? What does the Scanlon Foundation's findings tell us about the future of multiculturalism in Australia?

As discussed above, there is much to be positive about and the Report indicates that despite the negative dialogue sometimes found in certain mainstream media and some corners of politics, Australia is a welcoming and compassionate society, largely supportive of immigration and our humanitarian program. SCoA believes that this goodwill indicates that multiculturalism is alive and well in Australia and that Australia is therefore well-placed to reap the benefits from a strong migration program which delivers dynamic settlement outcomes.

Given the high levels of support for our humanitarian intake, and in light of the growing number of humanitarian crises around the world, SCoA believes that there is scope to increase our humanitarian intake, including an extension of the response to the Syrian crisis.

The strong support highlighted by the Report indicates that the system is working well, including and in many ways as a result of the extent of settlement services provided by SCoA members, which are crucial to ensuring the successful settlement of new arrivals. The Report reinforces the view that not only is Australia one of the world's great multicultural nations but also one with a highly successful settlement sector which ensures that recent arrivals are able to start new lives in Australia and enhances their potential to make positive social, civic, political and economic contributions to this country.

For further information contact SCoA National Office on 02 6282 8515 or info@scoa.org.au.

²⁰ Australians Today p29

²¹ Australians Today p31

²² Australians Today p32

²³ Report, page 25.