



Submission from Multilingual Australia to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's inquiry into the Role of Permanent Migration in Nation Building

Multilingual Australia

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Executive summary

A focus on multilingualism is critical to strengthening labour market participation. Providing free and accessible English language courses are crucial step towards strengthening the economic and social contribution of migrants. Bilingual mothers, who are mostly secondary visa holders, are an unexplored opportunity to be trained as interpreters and translators. By valuing bilingualism as an economic advantage, we can help build a more diverse, inclusive, and culturally rich society where all individuals can contribute and thrive.

Who we are

Multilingual Australia is pleased to submit our response to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's inquiry into the role of permanent migration in nation-building.

Multilingual Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that has been dedicated to supporting families from diverse linguistic backgrounds since 2002. Formerly known as Bilingual Families Perth, our mission is to identify and address the needs of children, parents, and grandparents from non-English speaking backgrounds in relation to the maintenance and use of languages other than English at home.

We are committed to promoting multilingualism and focus on empowering families to confidently use a language other than English for communication within the family and help families overcome the barriers that may prevent them from using their native languages, such as a lack of confidence or resources. Additionally, we advocate for multilingualism in the broader community by raising awareness about the benefits of multilingualism

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and the importance of linguistic diversity because a more inclusive and diverse Australia is one that values and celebrates linguistic diversity.

Our vision is a language-friendly Australia. Our mission is to help people connect, learn, and maintain their languages by helping families overcome barriers that may prevent them from using their native languages, providing opportunities and resources and fostering strong relationships.

Languages in Australia spoken by migrants

Over 300 languages are spoken in Australian homes every day. After English, the most common languages spoken at home are Mandarin, Arabic, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Punjabi, Greek, Italian, Tagalog, Hindi and Spanish. Yet despite the clear role that languages play in the lives of many migrants and their children, Australia has never implemented a National Policy on Languages. We believe the "L" in CaLD – culturally and linguistically diverse – needs attention by promoting a multilingual approach in our communities.

Australia's social cohesion and multicultural policies need a much stronger focus on multilingualism. It is crucial that we shift towards a society where languages are seen as assets, and migrants feel valued for speaking other languages. The current "speak English only" mentality, biases against accents and linguistic discrimination are major obstacles that must be addressed and overcome.

Strengthening labour market participation

Multilingual individuals can bridge cultural divides, which is essential for a society that values diversity and inclusiveness.

For example, many migrant mothers who come to Australia as secondary visa holders are often the primary language speakers in the household. These women could be trained as interpreters and translators for languages that currently have low numbers of accessible interpreters and translators, and by utilising the skills and talents of these bilingual mothers, we can support the integration of CaLD communities and improve access to services in languages other than English.

Multilingualism can help to increase social cohesion within a community. Migrants who are able to use their languages in addition to English are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and connection to other speakers in their community, which can help to foster stronger relationships and reduce feelings of isolation.



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English language classes

Multilingualism is a key factor for social cohesion and labour market participation, and the provision of accessible and effective English language classes plays a crucial role in supporting the integration of migrants into the community and workforce.

For example, providing free and more accessible English language courses to partners or family members of migrants who arrive to undertake child-rearing duties (e.g. grandparents) would help them to become more involved in the local community.

Research supports the notion that language learners are more likely to succeed when taught by instructors fluent in both their native language and the language they are trying to learn. This enables the instructor to tailor their approach to the students' specific linguistic and cultural needs, leading to a more effective learning experience. For example, a study by Wong Fillmore (1991) found that students who were taught by teachers who spoke their native language made faster progress in English language learning compared to students who were taught by teachers who did not speak their language.

To address this issue, encouraging bilingual individuals to be trained to become English language instructors would increase the effectiveness and uptake of English language classes, help break down linguistic barriers, and foster stronger relationships within the community.

Social cohesion and multicultural policies

It is important for Australia to promote and encourage multilingualism as it plays a crucial role in promoting social cohesion and inclusivity. Despite the increasing number of languages spoken in the country, linguistic discrimination, the "speak English only" mentality, and accent biases persist, leading to linguistic marginalisation and decreased social cohesion.

Strong multilingual policies and a positive attitude towards multilingualism are important in creating language-friendly environments where individuals can feel valued and confident in their linguistic abilities. A study by García & Li Wei (2014) found that the lack of recognition of the importance of multilingualism can lead to negative attitudes and linguistic discrimination, resulting in the devaluation of bilingual individuals' languages and cultural backgrounds. Challenging these attitudes and promoting a more positive view of multilingualism is essential.

Multilingual representation and expertise should be included in the decision-making process to achieve a more comprehensive and inclusive language policy. García & Li Wei (2014) emphasised that multilingual policies must go beyond translation and interpretation and should aim to recognise the value of multilingualism in all aspects of society, including the economy, education, and individual self-determination.





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References

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