

Submission to the Joint standing Committee on Migration

Inquiry into Multiculturalism Submitted by

***FINACT (Federation of Indian Associations of ACT)
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Introduction

FINACT is the umbrella organisation of various Indian Associations in ACT. It currently has 19 Member associations. The primary objective of FINACT is to advocate on matters of interest to the Indian Communities, to promote Indian Art & Culture and to foster friendships with the wider Australian Community.

This submission provides an excellent opportunity for us to evaluate the contribution that Australia's migration policies have made to Australia's economic and social development. It is also an opportunity to identify improvements, which can be made to ensure our migration policies, and programs are responsive to changes in the global market place and are designed to maximise the benefits to the Australian community. FINACT's interest in Australia's migration policies relates to the important role not only the Indian community play but also the other wider migrant community play in contributing to the economic development and the cultural enrichment of Australia.

Overview

FINACT acknowledges and recognises the significant contribution made by migrants to Australia's economic and social development and the importance of their continuing contribution to Australia's economic and social well-being. FINACT believes migration policy will continue to have an important role to play in ensuring Australia

has the skills base necessary to meet our longer-term economic, social and environmental objectives. However to maximise the benefits that migration can deliver, migration policy need to be responsive to changing circumstances and needs of the Australian community.

FINACT wishes to make a number of general comments on issues relevant to the terms of reference for this inquiry and these are outlined below.

Economic implications of immigration:

One major aspect of immigration is its impact on economic matters. The new immigrants are both producers and consumers – through jobs, social services, consumer goods, savings, taxation, and all the economic activities that other Australians are involved in. The role of investment in human capital in contributing to productivity growth is now well recognised. The stock of human capital is reflected in the level of skills, competencies and knowledge of members of society. It is built-up over time mainly through investment in education and training (public and private expenditure) and learning in the workplace. While investment in higher levels of education and training is the most important contributor to human capital formation, migration can play an important complementary role. Migrants contribute to the economic development of Australia in many ways including:

- Stimulating job creation by growing the market;
- Addressing specific skill shortages;
- Creating new business opportunities and business expansion including through
 - direct investment in the Australian economy;
 - Facilitating the acquisition and diffusion of new knowledge (skills);
 - Creating a more innovative culture with the introduction of new perspectives and
- Providing for a more culturally diverse population, which promotes global integration, and trading links.

Globalisation and the increasing knowledge intensity of economic activity means that Australia's international competitiveness is more dependent on the quality of the nation's human capital, that is, the skills and knowledge of its workers. At the same time, highly skilled workers are becoming more mobile and the market for their skills more competitive. The growing number of Australian engineers, accountants, teachers and health professionals emigrating to seek both permanent and temporary employment opportunities is evidence of the latter. Like many other economies, Australia is facing a major skills formation challenge across a number of skilled occupations. Increasing global competition for skilled workers is contributing to this problem. Shortages of skilled professionals will become a more critical issue over the next decade as the number of new entrants into the workforce declines and the population ages. Failure to continually upgrade the skills of our workforce and address specific skill shortages will limit the labour market's potential contribution to future productivity growth. Migration can play an important role in raising the overall level of skills, addressing identified skill shortages and the loss of skills through emigration. Migration policies need to be responsive to these competitive pressures. It also essential that migration policies operate within a broader policy framework that reflects the importance of investment in skill formation to productivity growth and international competitiveness and the factors that make nations a destination of choice for highly skilled professionals.

The rise in international competition for skilled professionals suggests the need for a more professional, sustained and targeted approach to attracting skilled professionals to Australia than is currently the case. In such a competitive environment, it is also important that any promotion and attraction programs are developed based on sound information and research about the factors influencing the decisions of professionals to migrate to Australia and Australia's relative competitiveness as a destination of choice. Australia's skilled migration program must also be as responsive and streamlined as possible. Closer matching of employer requirements and applicant skills. It is essential that Australia's migration policies be designed to deliver the skills required by the labour market.

Skilled migrants who enter under the Employer-Nominated migration stream are the most successful in the Australian labour market. For this reason, FINACT would like to see much greater emphasis placed on the employer-nominated migration stream. Skilled migrants are also more likely to meet employer requirements if they have strong English-speaking ability and communication skills. A number of studies have found a close relationship between the ability to speak, read and write English and successful assimilation into the Australian labour market. Higher levels of English ability are strongly associated with higher employment and participation rates, and lower unemployment rates. This correlation remains strong over the long-term. These studies also suggest that relatively small improvements in English speaking capacity would result in relatively large improvements in labour market status. It is vital that the migration program is targeted at those skills that are not presently available to the required degree in the Australian labour market. There may be opportunities to build linkages between government programs to address skill shortages and help skilled migrants find employment in their areas of competence.

FINACT believes that language training, bridging programs and initiatives such as those referred to above have an important role to play in addressing barriers to appropriately qualified migrants entering the professional workforce. There is also scope to better promote successful initiatives, which can be replicated elsewhere. Encouraging transitional migration, FINACT would like to see the skilled migration program place greater emphasis on attracting professionals who wish to work in Australia for a period but who are not intending to migrate. This could be a useful mechanism for increasing the flexibility of the professional skills base in responding to changes in supply and demand particularly in cyclical industries like mining and engineering. There are other benefits associated with transitional migration including technology transfer and the development of networks, which may deliver economic benefits in the longer term.

Social inclusion

Social exclusion is the process that leads to a breakdown of the relationship between society and the individual. Social inclusion is the other side of the pendulum and talks about the opportunities for people to maximize their social, political, cultural and economic rights.

FINACT's view is that Social Inclusion cannot subsume the multicultural agenda. The current Social Inclusion Agenda does not give cultural diversity the significance it needs in order to address social cohesion issues, which arise because of cultural differences. However, there are challenges we face which we must respond to effectively, but calmly. We must continue to build and continue our vigilance, if only to guard the success we value and sometimes take for granted. The threat of violence reaches everywhere in the world, including to Australia. For example, – the bombings in London, Bali and India – pose a threat to our maintenance of community in the face of these terrorist acts. Consequently, some Australians live under the shadow of unfair suspicion, discrimination, vilification or violence because of their religion, culture or background. This climate of exclusion is a potential rift in our society that we cannot afford if we are to build a safe, tolerant and productive future together. Community harmony is one of our most valuable national assets and is critical to domestic security in a time of global unrest. Therefore, our society must ensure members of our Australian family do not suffer the blame for the individuals who commit such crimes. Ignorance and misunderstanding about others' religions and the misuse of religion by those who seek to divide, are emerging challenges for Australia. Our security does not depend on making some Australians feel isolated. Everyone should feel included in the life of our great nation, to feel a sense of belonging.

Settlement and participation

Immigration policies need to shape up with in accordance with the demographic make-up of the Australian population and the development of Australia's multicultural society. We feel it would be wise to examine the experiences of the most recent arrivals against a

number of key settlement indicators and evaluates their settlement outcomes. This provides a basis for exploring the differences in settlement outcomes among migrant groups and the need for more focused targeting of services for refugees. In establishing themselves in Australia, new arrivals will need to find somewhere to live, find work or establish some form of income, enrol their children in school, access health services and generally begin to develop relationships with the Australian community. They will need to manage the impact of the stresses of the migration process on themselves and their family. Other things they may need to do, depending on their circumstances, include developing their English language skills, using translating and interpreting services and connecting with local migrant communities. New arrivals will also require appropriate information about the new environment and support to gain access to services to meet their needs. Following initial processes, migrants experience a more gradual process of establishing ongoing economic viability, social networks and a more comprehensive understanding of Australian society, institutions and services. Pre-migration experiences have an ongoing influence on an individual's settlement experience. Refugees, in particular, may arrive with a number of emotional and psychological difficulties as well as physical health issues. They may have undergone a variety of traumatic experiences before arriving in Australia, including torture, persecution, violent civil discord, arbitrary abductions, sexual abuse, the loss of loved ones, imprisonment, disease and starvation. They may also have spent long periods of time in refugee camps and/or in transit countries. The ongoing impact of these experiences can significantly hamper their capacity to settle.

FINACT views Settlement is not just a residency issue. It is rather a process involving the growth of civic confidence, participation and responsibility. Many new migrants and refugees might feel 'settled' at one point but then have something happen to them that reopens doors to their past experiences. It is our experience that settlement needs, in terms of access to services, English language proficiency, general 'well being' and participation in all levels of society; occur at various stages of a person's life in Australia. What could be described as a 'community service' need arising from major life events

(e.g. illness, child and family issues, unemployment, family breakdown, ageing, disability), is potentially more acute as a result of unmet needs arising from the migration process. Analysing settlement experiences is complex and as the above comments indicate, there are varied and contentious views about when and whether settlement can be said to have occurred. There is a long and unresolved debate on whether settlement should be defined by a person's length of residence or by achievement of certain objectives. There are also differing interpretations of successful settlement by the host society, by government agencies and by migrants.

We believe, the end result of settlement can therefore be seen in broad terms as the active participation of migrants in Australian society as self-reliant and valued members.

Challenges to Multiculturalism

We should not forget that some of the strongest allies of community harmony lie within our diverse religious organisations themselves. Working with appropriate partners, we can harness considerable leadership across the whole of Australian society. Inclusiveness, participation and integration, including for faith-based communities, are to be the high priorities for Australian government policy. The community leaders should continue to take a lead role in working with their communities to advance harmony, mutual understanding and democratic Australian values, and challenge violence and extremism. The Australian Government need to take initiative to ensure that its programs and policies enhance mutual understanding between various ethnic communities and the broader Australian community, and promote Australian values of harmony, justice and democracy. We believe loyalty to Australia and our commitment to the democratic traditions, values and institutions of the Australian nation form a common bond of everyone and indeed of all Australians.

Conclusion

In many ways, Australia is a model of a successful multicultural nation. Many other countries seek to learn from Australia's success. The millions of migrants who have come to Australia contributed much to a uniquely Australian ethos that involves a balance of rights and responsibilities. Our country and its institutions are sufficiently robust to withstand the challenges facing Australian multiculturalism that we have outlined. We believe we can make – and are making – a difference through the concerted effort with various ethnic communities and in partnership with the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and various other religious organisations to foster tolerance, acceptance, cultural diversity as a productive and unifying force in our society, and community harmony among Australia's diverse communities. Australian multiculturalism embraces the heritage of indigenous Australians, early European settlement, our Australian-grown customs and traditions and experiences of new migrants coming to this country; and promotes mutual respect and equality, aiming to enhance social cohesion and Australia's capacity to withstand both external and domestic tensions. Our multicultural policies also affirm that all Australians have the opportunity to be active and equal participants in society, and are free to maintain their religious and cultural traditions within Australian law. Whether on a collective or an individual level, people need to believe that there is a place for them in Australia's economic and social future – without having to sacrifice their cultural or religious identity. This does not mean that people have free rein to do as they please under the guise of their culture or religion. All Australians must be united by a commitment to a shared future, an overriding loyalty to our nation, its democratic institutions and values, and support for the rule of law with English as a common language. In closing, we would like to acknowledge the valuable work the Australian government is undertaking in helping to build bonds of harmony and inclusiveness in our increasingly diverse society, and in providing support and guidance to people from many cultural backgrounds in Australia.