'Mapping Social Services Provision for Diverse Communities'

An Australian Research Council Linkage Project

Executive Summary for Key Findings

Fethi Mansouri, Matteo Vergani & Enqi Weng

ADI
ALFRED DEAKIN INSTITUTE FOR CITIZENSHIP AND GLOBALISATION

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

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Background to Project

The Australian Research Council Linkage Project on 'Mapping Social Services Provision for Diverse Communities' aimed to investigate the perceived impact and the ideological and political drivers motivating a shift in service delivery from community-specific to mainstream organisations, as informed by Australian state and federal government policies. There is no systematic research on this shift or its socio-economic consequences for diverse migrant communities. Yet, this shift is gathering momentum in Australia and has also been reported in many other émigré countries, often termed in the relevant literature as the ***mainstreaming of services***. This relates to situations where mainstream organisations are being increasingly characterised as best placed to cater to the needs of migrant communities and, where community-specific service providers are seen as economically inefficient, even a barrier to social integration.

Preliminary consultations with Partner Organisations (POs) for this project, the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights, the Victorian Multicultural Commission and the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, suggested that this shift towards mainstreaming has manifested in the direction undertaken by the Australian government in funding service provision for Australia's migrant communities. What has been visible yet under-researched is its perceived impact on the wellbeing and socio-economic outlook of these migrant communities. In this project, we focused on investigating the perceived impact of the shift towards the mainstreaming of service provision in three key areas of needs for newly emerging and established migrant communities: health, social (e.g. housing) and economic (e.g. employment and job training). Specifically, the project sought to answer three main questions to understand the impact of this shift in service delivery from community-specific to mainstream organisations. These questions are:

How is mainstreaming experienced by Australian migrant communities?

We uncovered the nuances and complexity of service provision in the experience of diverse migrant communities, informed by the experiences of individuals and communities from migrant backgrounds at different points along the settlement and integration journey.

What are the key ideological and political drivers of mainstreaming of social services?

We analysed public and policy documents, media articles and political speeches to map the ideological and political drivers of the shift towards mainstreaming of service provision in Australia.

What is the impact of mainstreaming on multicultural Australia?

We assessed the perceived impact of mainstreaming on social cohesion, citizenship and social and cultural rights of Australians from migrant backgrounds, informed by the experiences and perspectives of migrant communities, service providers, and the broader Australian population living in multicultural suburbs.

Project Design

This project is located within an innovative conceptual framework that draws heavily on active citizenship and social inclusion, and focuses on the ability of all citizens to fully participate in a particular political community. A mixed-methods research design that combined qualitative and quantitative sociological methods was used to map and examine the impact of mainstreaming of social services. The research used quantitative methods in the form of 1,152 survey questionnaires, and qualitative methods in the form of interviews with 31 service providers, 16 government representatives (local, state and federal) and 50 members from various new, emerging and established migrant communities. It focused on data collection from two site locations: the cities of Hume and Greater Dandenong in Victoria, Australia. These locations were selected as they are characterised by significant diversity in country of birth and language, and experience a range of socio-economic disadvantage. The research was designed to be implemented in three chronological stages, outlined as follows:

▶ Stage 1

Aimed to generate an original **typology of service provision modes** and approaches as experienced by community members in both site locations. In total, we spoke to 31 service providers (made up of mainstream, multicultural and ethno-specific providers) and 16 policy makers and government stakeholders at local, state and federal levels, with a balanced representation of genders, age groups and perspectives on service provision.

▶ Stage 2

Aimed to gain insight into the shifting discourse around service delivery modes within Australian public discourse, with particular attention to the transition towards mainstreaming. Employing **critical discourse analysis**, we conducted a comprehensive examination of public documents and speeches by political figures, policymakers, and other stakeholders through policy papers and media pieces spanning from January 1996 to February 2021.
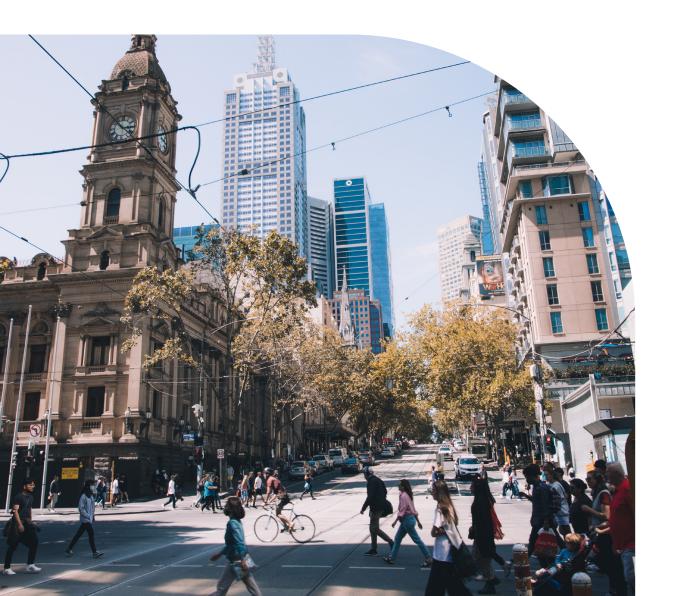
▶ Stage 3

Aimed to understand the experiences of social integration in the migrant population and their capacity, ability and motivations for civic engagement, social inclusion and active citizenship. We used mixed methods, including survey questionnaires and qualitative methods, to understand **the impact of the mainstreaming of social services** at both site locations. In total, we collected 1,152 survey questionnaires from adult residents in Australia who were born overseas, aged at least 18 and who speak at least one language other than English at home. We interviewed 50 community members (25 at each site), paying particular attention to the socio-political implications of mainstreaming, and the implications for belonging, access and equity agendas. The sample was selected to evenly represent different gender, age, and population groups in each of the sites.

What is the key issue and why is it important for Australia?

There is a growing debate around how best to manage diversity on a policy level in complex superdiverse societies such as Australia. While there is a need to ensure that this diversity is well supported, there are also concerns around issues of social cohesion and national citizenship. According to Census 2021, Australia is now a migrant-majority country, where more than half of its population has at least one parent who was born overseas. Its rich diversity in culture, language and religion is also reflected in more than 300 languages, more than 100 religions and more than 300 ancestries. Despite the growing diversity, there appears to be persistent shortcomings in adequately addressing the needs of diverse communities, as people from migrant backgrounds continue to experience numerous obstacles when trying to access crucial social services at pivotal junctures during the settlement process. When the settlement needs of new migrants were first recognised and outlined through the 1978 Galbally Report, the service sector adopted a range of mainstream (offering services to the general population, including migrant communities) and ethno-specific approaches (which cater to specific needs based on ethno-cultural backgrounds), and even mixed-delivery modes to meet these needs.

The recent pandemic has highlighted the need for the Australian government to develop a long-term strategy to address the needs of multicultural communities. The COVID-19 response revealed a deficiency in the government's understanding of the social, cultural, economic and healthcare dimensions of diverse communities, when migrant communities were amongst the most adversely impacted.

Key findings

▶ Stage 1

Through a combination of interviews and thorough examination of service providers' websites and publications, our findings reveal that **there is no clear separation between 'ethno-specific' and 'mainstream' service providers.** Although often described as dualistic in nature, the distinction between mainstream and ethno-specific (or community-specific) approaches is complex and dynamic, and sometimes blurred in the experiences of migrant communities. Ethno-specific and mainstream are not discrete categories and often partially overlap. For example, mainstream services can sometimes adopt culturally sensitive practices, employ ethno-specific or bilingual workers, or offer specific services to specific communities. Moreover, migrant communities access a diverse range of services across different types and modes of service provision. Different service-provision modes are often equated with different needs at different junctures along the migrant settlement journey, with ethno-specific services being more often provided to newly arrived individuals and communities. Mainstream and community-specific approaches are not necessarily at odds with one another. Rather, our findings reveal that there is a **spectrum around 'multicultural capacity'** among different service providers (see Figure 1 below). As such, we have broadened the conceptualisation of service providers as ethno-specific, multicultural and mainstream to more accurately reflect the diversity of service provision modes in the sector. The degree of these service providers' multicultural capacity is dependent on factors that include the provider's commitment to serving multicultural communities, the diversity of its leadership and staff, and the extent of language support and cultural competence within the organisation. The impact of these providers is also dependent on how secure their funding models are.

Figure 1: Typology of service providers based on the security of their funding models and the degree of their multicultural capacity.

The typology reveals that multicultural service providers that have high multicultural capacity are working based on very insecure funding models (yellow quadrant). These service providers tend to be the ones that support new, emerging communities, especially those of intersectional identities (e.g. migrant women and international students from refugee backgrounds). The sector that is currently more securely funded are those in aged care provision and settlement services. Some mainstream service providers also have strong multicultural capacity to cater to a diverse community.

▶ Stage 2

Our analysis of Australian public documents from 1996 to 2021 reveals that there have not been any explicit policies communicated by government that outline any systematic shifts towards the mainstreaming of migration integration. However, the analysis also shows the presence of references to mainstreaming, which signals that the Australian government has indeed transitioned toward a more mainstream-focused approach in delivering services to multicultural communities. Discourses on mainstreaming manifest in two main ways, which we have conceptually termed as exclusionary and inclusive discourses. Exclusionary mainstreaming discourses places priority on a common, united Australian national identity and reflect caution on diversity and differences, and their contribution to disunity. Inclusive mainstreaming discourses identify that the Australian identity is a mosaic that comprises diversity to be celebrated. This perspective also acknowledges that some diverse groups require more support than others. These findings suggest that there is bipartisan agreement on a need for a mainstream approach to meet growing needs in a diverse population. This policy direction is determined by a strong economic rationale to streamline the approach towards service delivery and to ensure efficient outcomes. In terms of the impact of mainstreaming on service delivery for migrant communities, the findings are mixed. The mainstreaming of certain types of services, specifically aged care and disability support, through initiatives such as My Aged Care and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), has translated into robust support for more established migrants particularly through ethno-specific service providers. However, the benefits of mainstreaming for other cohorts, such as newly arrived migrants and refugees, are mixed, as there remain gaps in areas of support that include migrant women facing family violence and employment for newly arrived and established migrants.
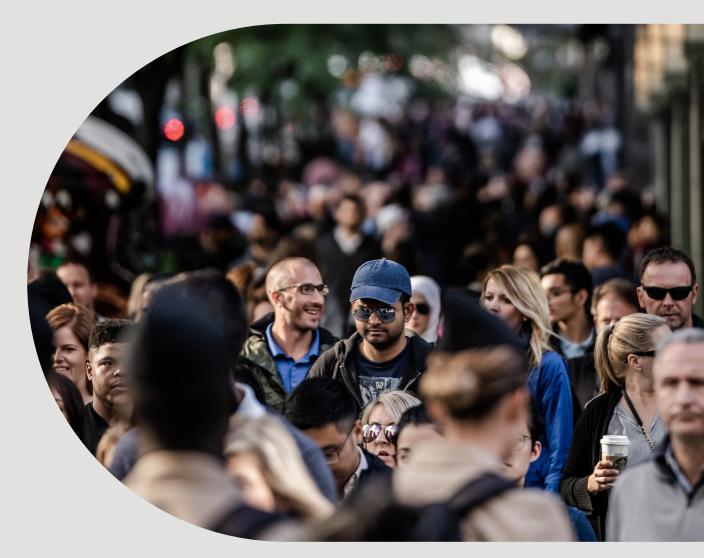
▶ Stage 3

Multicultural communities provided important insights from their experiences of accessing services and how such access shapes their sense of belonging, inclusion and citizenship.

Survey findings show that:
- The vast majority of participants (about 9 in 10) are comfortable in receiving a health, employment or housing service from a multicultural provider.
- Those who access multicultural service providers tend to have lower English proficiency, no Australian citizenship and have been settled in Australia for 10 years or less (35.5–36.8%). This means that multicultural service providers, or those with strong multicultural capacity, are in greater demand by migrants at the earlier phase of their settlement and especially if they have lower English proficiency and do not have Australian citizenship.
- Whilst 28.6% of participants have accessed at least one multicultural service provider in the past year, about 60% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that people in their community should be given access to multicultural services. This means that even if they do not access these services themselves, they view access to these types of services as important for their communities.
- Our findings suggest that people who belong to categories that are more in need of culturally specific services (i.e. with lower English proficiency, recently arrived in Australia) and from communities that are more excluded (i.e. from non-Western countries and non-Christian backgrounds) perceive greater importance and effectiveness of multicultural services.
- Participants faced barriers accessing mainstreaming services, that included being on a waiting list, in areas such as health (24.6%) and housing (20.9%). Many participants (13.1%) also expressed challenges in navigating complex paperwork.

Qualitative interviews with community members reveal that their use of social services, whether mainstream, ethno-specific and/or multicultural, is one of many factors that shape their sense of belonging, inclusion and citizenship in Australia. These experiences are often integrated with other factors such as their access and participation in civic engagement and employment. These spheres are also often interrelated.

Our research participants refer to their sentiments of belonging, citizenship and inclusion in two main ways. In practical ways, their visa status plays a significant role in their access to services, and they are accepted into wider society through employment. In more affective ways, their access to social connections, established by building relationships with staff members and their ethnic communities through accessing service providers with strong multicultural capacity, provides them with social capital. This social capital helps foster connections not only with other service providers but also with other diaspora/ethnic/religious communities and even broader Australian communities. For these communities, their sense of wellbeing and inclusion in Australian society are strengthened through such access. Our research participants also report on various forms of exclusion that destabilise their sense of belonging and citizenship. Poor settlement can have lifelong impact and consequences. For some, their ethno-cultural and/or religious identities may produce forms of exclusion for them, particularly where tensions are present in these diaspora communities. The lack of English capacity, and being and sounding foreign, continues to contribute to their social and economic exclusion in Australia.

Key Recommendations

Diversity and inclusion policies need to be a key dimension of the social service sector, on a policy level, and through a whole-of-government approach at local, state and federal levels to enhance the capacity of multicultural communities. This includes the provision of relevant language services, the inclusion of bicultural workers, the diversity of leaders and staff and the provision of frequent culturally responsive training for all staff.

A hybrid model of service provision is critical – that encompasses ethno-specific, multicultural and mainstream service provision – to support diverse communities and their needs.

While there are strong supports in place for diverse communities, there is **room to improve on securing support for more vulnerable cohorts.**

Service providers that cater to service users of hybrid identities and needs, such as migrant women and health, and international students from refugee backgrounds, tend to be more financially insecure whilst catering to the needs of a particularly vulnerable cohort. Funding bodies need to **consider these intersectional needs** in the sector to ensure equity and access.

There needs to be improvement to the multicultural capacity of the social service sector to support an increasingly diverse Australia. Research evidence shows that service providers with stronger multicultural capacity are more effective for diverse communities.

Funding bodies at local, state and federal levels need to be **adaptive, flexible and more accountable** so that they can meet the needs of diverse communities. How they make service providers more accountable is critical, such as through funding agreements that require: genuine partnerships and co-design; demographic data collation to ascertain utilisation of services and the underrepresentation of segments of the community; and representation on boards, committees and in the workforce that reflect the communities they serve.

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