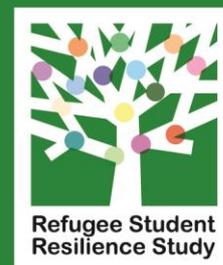


Key Issues Paper No. 5



Understanding Australian multicultural policy¹

Internationally, governments are concerned with issues related to refugee global displacement and resettlement. The Australian government prides itself on being 'the most successful multicultural society in the world, uniting a multitude of cultures, experiences, beliefs, and traditions.' (Turnbull, cited in Department of Home Affairs, 2017). However, Australia's responses to refugees have fluctuated significantly in the past due to historical and political factors (Marr, 2013). In this Key Issues Paper, we examine the history of Australia's multiculturalism policies to help us understand the political context in which education departments are developing, communicating and enacting policy for students from refugee backgrounds. To do this, we undertook a critical policy analysis of a federal public policy statement *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful* (2017).

Codd (1988) suggests that policy documents can be said to constitute the official discourse of the state. He further suggests that:

... policies produced by and for the state are obvious instances in which language serves a political purpose, constructing particular meanings and signs that work to mask social conflict and foster commitment to the notion of universal public interest. In this way, policy documents produce real social effects through the production and maintenance of consent. (Codd, 1988, p. 237)

Policy development and enactment can be 'understood as complex, inherently political, and infused with values rather than as a linear process that parallels a rational model of decision making' (Winton & Tuters, 2015, p. 123). Policy is 'both product and process' which is 'ongoing and dynamic' (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 2013, p. 23). That is:

Policy is much more than a specific policy document or text. Rather, policy is both process and product ... policy involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modifications to the text and processes of implementation into practice ... we see policy as being more complex, interactive and multi-layered. (Taylor et al., 2013, pp. 24-25)

In order to understand the federal government's position on multiculturalism, we provide an historical overview of relevant policies and their development. We then look more closely at a policy statement, *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful* (2017), to understand the current government's position.

¹ To cite this paper: Sullivan, A., Baak, M., Johnson, B., Slee, R. & Manolev, J. (2019). Understanding Australian multicultural policy, *Refugee Student Resilience Study Key Issues Paper No. 5*. University of South Australia. doi: 10.25954/5d4a5d131d09b

A historical overview of multicultural policy

The history of Australian multicultural policies shows that key policy changes have largely reflected changing federal governments and their ideologies. The changing policy constructions also responded to key events that captured the attention of mainstream Australia.

Figure 1 presents an historical overview of Australian Multicultural policy development over the last 40 years. It shows the government in office, advisory bodies, names of the Government departments, titles of the multicultural policies, key reports and key events or influential commentary. This visual representation shows that since its inception in 1978, multicultural policy remained relatively stable and grew in prominence until 1996. From 1996 onwards, multicultural policy experienced considerable change.

In 1989 a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia was released and it reveals the government discourse around multiculturalism as one that emphasises ideas about cultural identity, social justice and introduces for the first time the idea of economic efficiency in relation to multiculturalism (Fleras, 2009).

We begin to see a de-emphasising of the importance of multiculturalism at a government level from 1996 onward, which is reflected in the changing of department names over the years and coincides, firstly, with the election of a Coalition government intent on reducing the focus on multiculturalism (Jakubowicz, 2014), and secondly, by significant government instability.

In 1996 the Office of Multicultural Affairs was absorbed by the new Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. By 2007, the term *multicultural* vanishes from the departmental name all together. Recently, *immigration* is used in preference to multiculturalism.

In the early 2000's following major terrorism events, there was a shift in focus within policies like the Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity (2003) statement and the National Action Plan (2006) to a new discourse that framed multiculturalism within ideas about security, individual responsibility and social cohesion (Chiro, 2009).

In summary, federal policies have moved from concerns about multiculturalism underpinned by equity and social justice to policy addressing concerns of security, social integration and economic development.

Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful (2017)

The public policy statement *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful* (2017) seeks to provide 'the foundation on which we can further build our multicultural society.' (Porter & Seselja, cited in Department of Home Affairs, 2017).

The problem addressed in this policy was:

- A perceived dilution of 'Australian values' due to increasing multiculturalism.
- The perceived threat of decreased economic and social participation among immigrants.
- The perceived threat immigration poses to Australia's national security.

The policy statement focuses on issues related to:

- National security
- Social control and integration
- Australian values (respect, equality, freedom)
- Refugee and humanitarian migrants
- Economic productivity
- English language acquisition
- Inter-cultural dialogue

We draw on the work of Jakubowicz (2014) and Colvin (2017) to argue that this policy reflects the following implicit assumptions:

- Successful multiculturalism occurs through social integration into the pre-existing social order and adoption of aspirational core values
- “Equality of opportunity” is a preferred way in which to support the development of a multicultural Australia over “equality of outcome”.

We have identified in our research that education policy in Australia currently has a clear focus on the learning and wellbeing of all students. We will be examining these policies and others to investigate how and why schools and schooling systems have responded to students from refugee backgrounds in the ways they have within the political context described in this Key Issues Paper. In particular, we will consider how education departments mediate federal multicultural policy positions.

Refugee Student Resilience Study Overview

The *Refugee Student Resilience Study* aims to investigate how schools transcend the past life experiences of students from refugee backgrounds by creating the social and educational conditions that enhance resilience. It is focusing on the policies, practices, relationships, and events that shape the schooling experiences of students and promote their resilience. The research will collect data from a selection of case study secondary schools in two Australian states, including regional and metropolitan locations. These schools will contribute to the research with contextual data relating to good practices that enhance resilience for students from refugee backgrounds.

Education is recognised as a key protective factor in facilitating successful settlement and positive lifelong outcomes for young people from refugee backgrounds. Young people from refugee backgrounds have often had disrupted experiences of education prior to displacement and while language acquisition remains important in refugee education in Australia, we argue that schools may have a more holistic role to play in supporting students from refugee backgrounds. Schools are sites in which students from refugee backgrounds may access opportunities for academic, social, emotional and cultural learning and development.

For further information please see www.refugeesatschool.edu.au

Acknowledgements

The Refugee Student Resilience Study is being conducted by researchers at the University of South Australia (UniSA). This research is funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council Linkage Scheme (LP170100145). The following Partner Organisations have contributed funds and/or in-kind support to this Project:

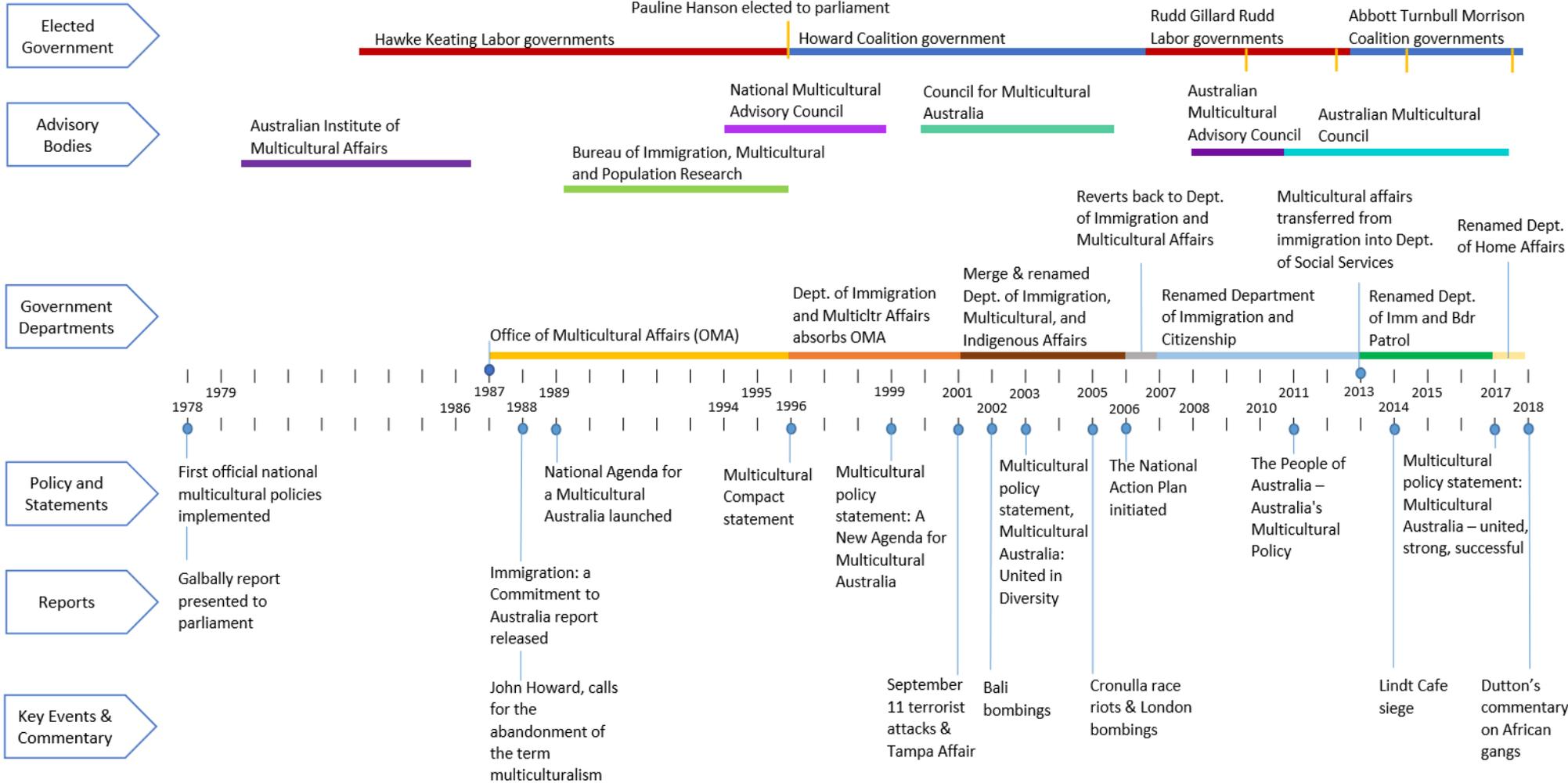
- Brisbane Catholic Education in Queensland (BCE)
- Department of Education and Training (DET)
- Department for Education and Child Development (DECD)
- Catholic Education South Australia (CESA)
- Australian Refugee Association (ARA)

References

- Chiro, G. (2009). *The marginalisation of multiculturalism and the emergence of social cohesion and inclusion politics in Australia*. TASA, Canberra, Australia.
- Codd, J. A. (1988). The construction and deconstruction of educational policy documents. *Journal of education policy*, 3(3), 235-247.
- Colvin, N. (2017). *The devil’s in the detail of Malcolm Turnbull’s new multicultural statement*. New Matilda. Retrieved from <https://newmatilda.com/2017/03/21/the-devils-in-the-detail-of-malcolm-turnbulls-new-multicultural-statement/>

- Department of Home Affairs. (2017). Multicultural Australia: United, strong, successful. Australian Government Retrieved from <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/LifeinAustralia/Documents/MulticulturalAffairs/english-multicultural-statement.pdf>.
- Fleras, A. (2009). *The politics of multiculturalism: Multicultural governance in comparative perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jakubowicz, A. (2014). "Don't mention it...": What government wants to hear and why about multicultural Australia. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 6(2), 1-24.
- Marr, D. (2013). *Panic*. Collingwood: Black Inc.
- Taylor, S., Rizvi, F., Lingard, B., & Henry, M. (2013). *Educational policy and the politics of change*. London: Routledge.
- Winton, S., & Tuters, S. (2015). Constructing bullying in Ontario, Canada: A critical policy analysis. *Educational Studies*, 41(1-2), 122-142.

Australian Multicultural Policy History



Sullivan, Baak, Johnson, Slee & Manolev (2019) Refugee Student Resilience Study. Australian Research Council Linkage Grant LP170100145 © UniSA

Figure 1: Historical overview of Australian multicultural policy development between 1978 and 2018