

DEVELOPING SUITABLE DESIGNATORS FOR A DIVERSE SOCIETY

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Since the early 1980s the term non-English-speaking-background (NESB) has been used as an indicator of disadvantage in diverse social policy areas. By the 1990s, these included equal opportunity provisions in the Federal Public Service, in higher-education equity planning and the allocation of Commonwealth funds for disadvantaged schools at the primary and secondary level. Though many of these provisions remain in place, there has been a counter movement against continued use of NESB in this way. State governments, including the Victorian Government have played an important role in developing more appropriate indicators. This paper describes the view of the Victorian Government.

BACKGROUND

At the meeting of the Ministerial Council of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in May 1996, Commonwealth and State Ministers noted the problems associated with the use of the term 'non-English speaking background' and its acronym 'NESB' and agreed that 'the term and acronym be dropped, where possible, from all official communications'.

This decision followed publication in January 1996 of *A Fair Go For All: Report on Migrant Access and Equity* by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, which strongly criticised the use of 'NESB'. The Committee commented that the term 'is no longer appropriate as a measure of disadvantage'. In evidence presented to the committee, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) noted that:

There is a widespread view that 'NESB' defines a group of people who suffer disadvantage of one type or another in Australian society...[I]t is important to note that 'NESB' does not in itself indicate that individuals are described as disadvantaged. Many people of 'NESB' are, in fact, high achievers, educationally, socially and economically (p. 111).

The ABS also pointed to problems of inconsistency in use. 'NESB' was not always defined in the same way. For instance, the Commonwealth's Public Service Act defines 'NESB' as 'persons who have migrated to Australia and whose first language is a language other than English and children of such persons'. This is a strictly language and migration based definition. The New South Wales Anti Discrimination Act describes people of 'NESB' as 'representing racial minorities, disadvantaged in Australia by virtue of colour, nationality, descent and ethnic, ethno-religious or national origin'. This definition focuses on a variety of factors which it is supposed typically indicate disadvantage.

At the March 1997 meeting of Ministers of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in Darwin, Ministers passed the following resolution:

Council agreed that a working group comprising the Commonwealth (DIMA), Victoria and NSW:

- approach the ABS to cost and develop a possible pilot in a number of government sectors, a data collection instrument based on the paper presented by Victoria; and
- report back to Council for endorsement of possible next steps, including funding arrangements

Council also agreed not to proceed with any single designator. The reasons for following this path are clear.

DIFFICULTIES WITH THE TERM ‘NESB’

Inconsistent use of the term

There is no agreement about the definition of ‘NESB’. The first major use of the term focuses on language: first language spoken, or preferred language, or language spoken at home — to which questions the same person will often give different answers. The second major definition uses country of birth as an indicator of cultural background, and includes within ‘NESB’ those countries where English is not the main language spoken. According to the third definition, ‘NESB’ means minority group historically disadvantaged due to their colour, race, religion and so on.

The effects of aggregating groups with different profiles of need

One effect of aggregating groups which are relatively disadvantaged with groups which are relatively advantaged is to produce data which don’t tell you what you may need to know. If the advantage of some parts of the ‘NESB’ grouping is as significant as the disadvantage of other parts of the grouping, the answer is zero. And even if the overall answer is disadvantage, you will never know how much disadvantage is outweighed by advantage, who is advantaged within the ‘NESB’ group compared to who is disadvantaged, or why.

A poor measure of disadvantage

‘NESB’ is an oversimplified category for identifying disadvantage and need. Highly educated, proficient speakers of English as a second language find themselves in the same category as people who speak very little English. Business migrants with powerful networks and resource backing find themselves in the same category as refugees.

Usefulness for appropriate service provision

Service provision based on the oversimplified ‘NESB’ category can imply special and unwarranted treatment. Rather, people need to be assured that clients will be assisted on the basis of their particular needs, rather than in terms of simplified bureaucratic categories. Within this inclusive commitment there will always be segmented needs, and to provide equitable, appropriate and cost-effective service delivery, programs must provide for these needs.

Issues of culture, language and identity

The categories of ‘NESB’ and ‘ESB’ (English-Speaking Background) neglect relevant issues

of culture, language and identity. For example, Maoris who have emigrated from New Zealand are categorised as being from an English-speaking country, yet have their own culture and language. Australian South Sea Islanders, the descendants of the 'Kanakas', are not defined as 'NESB', nor are they Indigenous, yet recent reports have clearly shown that they experience serious difficulties in accessing government services.

Negativity of the term

Many people perceive 'NESB' as describing people in terms of negatives — in particular, an implied lack of proficiency in English. The term does not reflect the positive aspects of having bicultural skills and being able to speak a language other than English.

THE PUBLIC POLICY CONTEXT

The public policy context within which Victoria and, to an increasing extent, the rest of Australia operate demands better and more incisive data collection in order to meet efficiency gains as well as to achieve better service outcomes. Collecting the appropriate data on a service is essential to good planning and effective distribution of resources. It is also a pre-requisite to good evaluation, benchmarking, output-based budgeting, performance indicators and performance management.

The Australian reality is more complex than the three clearly defined social groups, 'ATSI', 'NESB' and 'ESB', suggest. There are significant variations of need for government services and programs under those banners and group definitions are increasingly not only useless in identifying need, but increasingly divisive. As Australians we have a myriad of differences in life experience, needs and interests. These differences are shaped by many characteristics, such as language spoken at home, country of origin, ethnic background, education level, English proficiency, gender, age, geographic location and income level. As service providers, the terminology and statistics we use must focus on the characteristics which provide the most useful indicators of the assistance which our clients need.

The Victorian Government has a policy of 'mainstreaming' services; that is, ensuring that all government services aim to provide proper access for clients of diverse backgrounds. This has been given additional impetus by the recent launch of the Government's Pledge to the People of Victoria. The Pledge affirms the Victorian Government's commitment to provide access to government and community resources by ensuring that all services meet the needs of a diverse community.

Mainstreaming has been a trend among governments Australia-wide, and requires departments and agencies to put diversity at the core of their mainstream service delivery, rather than at the margins. According to 1996 Census figures, 17 per cent of Victorians were born in a non-English-speaking country. Victorians speak over 151 languages and originate from 208 countries. More than 20 per cent of Victorians speak a language other than English at home. This means that governments have to provide services which are more responsive to the special needs that this level of diversity demands. It means that services for these clients can no longer be regarded as an optional 'add on', or something which only ethno-specific agencies need address.

Mainstreaming does not mean that community based organisations are no longer involved in providing services. Funded ethnic services and mainstream services coexist in a wide range

of state government services areas. In addition to direct service delivery, ethnic services are in a unique position to:

- Provide ethnic communities with a single referral point to many services;
- inform mainstream services about the background and needs of their ethnic clients; and
- provide a conduit for consultations.

Mainstreaming does mean, however, that a client accessing a mainstream service should be offered a service appropriate to their needs. There are several reasons why leaving appropriate service provision for clients to ethnic agencies is inadequate. These include:

- the diversity and geographic dispersion of ethnic communities which mean that ethnic agencies are not able to provide services to all members of ethnic communities;
- some clients prefer using culturally sensitive mainstream services, for example for reasons of confidentiality in small communities; and
- recently arrived migrant communities often have both high needs for services and few resources to provide these services through their own organisations.

SERVICE DELIVERY IN A CULTURALLY DIVERSE SOCIETY

The COAG Charter of Public Service for a Culturally Diverse Society aims at ensuring that government services meet the particular needs of users and achieve intended outcomes for them. In a diverse society like Australia it means making services culturally appropriate, accessible, consumer-oriented and effective. The Charter promotes seven principles of best practice. These are: a) Access: Government services should be available to everyone who is entitled to them and should be free of any form of discrimination on the basis of a person's country of birth, language, culture, race or religion.

b) Equity: Government services should be developed and delivered on the basis of fair treatment of clients who are eligible to receive them.

c) Responsiveness: Government services should be sensitive to the needs and requirements of clients from diverse language and cultural backgrounds, and responsive to the particular circumstances of individuals.

d) Effectiveness: Government service providers should be 'results oriented', focussed on meeting the needs of clients from all backgrounds.

e) Efficiency: Government service providers should optimise the use of available public resources through a user-responsive approach to service delivery which meets client needs.

f) Communication: Government service providers should use strategies to inform eligible clients of services and their entitlements and how they can obtain them. Providers should also consult with their clients regularly about the adequacy, design and standard of government services.

g) Accountability: Government service providers should have a reporting mechanism in place which ensures they are accountable for implementing access and equity objectives for clients (for example, by reporting on this in annual reports or other types of report). The Charter represents a new approach to access and equity. The Charter places the emphasis on building

diversity considerations into the strategic planning and reporting processes of government service delivery — irrespective of whether these services are provided by government agencies, community organisations or commercial enterprises.

Effective data collection forms a central part of the practical and monitoring dimensions of the Charter.

It was in this context that Victoria, through the State Intergovernmental Settlement Committee, consolidated a number of earlier projects and research, to put forward a proposal to conduct a pilot project to test an alternative to NESB as a designator.

DATA AND PLANNING — THE BASIS OF THE VICTORIA PAPER

Within the context of mainstreaming and the COAG Charter, it is critical that government departments are able to answer the following questions: a) Do you know who your clients or potential clients are?

b) Do you know whether or not your services are reaching all those who need those services? and

c) Is the service that is being provided necessary or adequate to the needs of your clients? When data are collected consistently and with a clear purpose in mind, they can answer these important questions and enable a department to plan its current and future service demands in a better way.

For example, the Education department will need to have a range of information about its service region in order to plan properly the placement and type of education institutions. It will need to know the current and projected age profile of its service region; it will need to analyse this against population movements. (Do certain age groups move in or out at certain periods of time? are these young families, elderly residents or those approaching child bearing years?) It will also need to know the socio-economic and labour market status of its region in order to advise whether or not it could support private schools. The migration status of new residents may be important, say, in a region that attracts high numbers of refugees. Refugees typically have high service demands in areas of health, language and housing as well as special education needs as a result of interrupted schooling. A region that has 60 per cent of residents that speak Greek as their first language may have significantly lower language service needs than a region that has only ten per cent of residents who speak a language other than English, but the residents of the latter region may come from 25 different language groups, be recently arrived and have poor English language skills. It is obvious that the resource demands, infrastructure, facilities, curricula and other related issues are going to be significantly different for each region.

It is also of vital importance that the data collected to measure these variables can be compared not only between government departments in one state, but more importantly, be compared between all three levels of government, nation wide.

The use of standard definitions and measurement will increase the usefulness of the data collected as the capacity to analyse service usage across need and geographic location, greatly increases the value of the information collected.

There may well be difficulties in changing the data collection systems of departments to include one or more new variables. The long-term benefits, however, outweigh the immediate problems. If services are better targeted and delivered more efficiently, both service providers and service users benefit.

The Government sector currently shares very few common definitions and data standards — indeed, it is often the case that even within individual departments, there is no agreement on data standards. Benchmarking, performance indicators, best practice and output based budgeting mean little in an environment where data cannot be properly compared, or take-up rates measured.

THE STEERING COMMITTEE

The Victorian Government, in conjunction with DIMA and the ABS, is leading a Steering Committee of the Council of Ministers of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to develop a suitable set of measures, to replace ‘NESB’ in particular, which is workable in a range of administrative and service provision settings.

The Steering Committee will seek to achieve several things. The first is a key measure of ethnicity based on First Language Spoken and the second will be to develop a range of other measures based on ABS statistical standards.

At this early stage, it is envisaged that these other measures will include:

- Country of birth
- Visa Entry/Migration Status
- Year of Arrival in Australia (period of residence in Australia)
- Religion
- Birthplace of Parents
- First Language Spoken
- English language proficiency

These questions are intended to supplement, not replace, existing data collection systems — it is assumed that existing data collection systems already ask standardised ABS questions in relation to age, sex, place of residence and so on, depending on the information required by the service provider.

It is proposed that the ABS develop statistical standards to define and measure those variables not already standardised. Together these variables will provide information to assess client needs in Australian administrative and service provision settings, monitoring access to services and evaluating the outcomes they receive from services. An important aspect of the work will be to promote the comparability of data from these sources with the Population Census and survey statistics produced by the ABS and other research agencies.

In addition to developing these individual standards, the Steering Committee hopes to be able to develop a set of models which will prioritise and sequence the variables included in a set of Best Practice Guidelines. These models will enable users to choose and implement the set of variables that best suit their particular information needs, whether that be the key language variable alone, or a suitable, larger, sub-set of the variables. It is proposed that these be pilot-tested in a number of key government sectors. At present those include the Victorian

Department of Human Services, the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and two Victorian Local Government Areas. The pilot project will also evaluate the effectiveness and usefulness of the proposed models and the results will be used to refine and finalise data collection instruments that will have national application.

CONCLUSION

The Steering Committee will report back to Ministerial Council with a range of costed options and methodology to implement the proposed pilot projects.

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