

Interculturalism in Australia

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The story of interculturalism in Australia –
building on multiculturalism to strengthen social inclusion and
equity

Australia is an 'Immigration Nation'

- First Nations Peoples: 65,000 years ago
- British Colonisation & Convict Era: 1788- 1901, Gold Rushes mid-19th century
- "White Australia": a racially discriminatory immigration policy designed to maintain a predominantly European population: 1901 – 1960s
- "Populate or Perish" mass immigration program: Post-WWII
- Abolition of the White Australia Policy: 1973 -1975
- Today: one of the highest share of migrants in the OECD 30%; over half born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas

‘A multicultural success story’

Since dismantling its racially discriminatory immigration policy and assimilationist settlement policy, Australia has been seen as among the most successful multicultural societies in the world

Diversity and Settlement policy:

- Assimilation: 1901 – 1960s
- Multiculturalism 1973- present

Today:

- Policies are embedded at 3 levels of government - Introduced by the Federal government, then taken up by State governments and later by Local governments
- High levels of acceptance of diversity, cohesion and inclusion

New challenges to social cohesion

In recent decades, Australia has faced new diversity challenges

- Since 9/11 linked immigration and multiculturalism have been linked with national security concerns
- 'Superdiversity': the diversification of diversity
 - Migration Status, Transnational Connections, Socio-economic Differences, Demographic Factors
- Racism targeting specific groups has increased
 - Muslim, African, Indigenous, Asian and Jewish Australians
- Social cohesion has declined
 - cost-of-living pressures, housing affordability, decline in sense of national belonging, concerns about and immigration, and safety fears

Policymakers are adopting interculturalism

Multiculturalism:

- Recognition of cultural heritage
- Right to equal treatment and opportunity
- Utilising skills and talents of all Australians

Interculturalism adds:

- Interaction and dialogue between cultural groups, including the majority group
- A two-way process of migrant integration between newcomers and the host community
- Participation of minority groups in governance and civic life

Innovation from the grassroots up

Interculturalism was first adopted at the city level

- Individual policymakers promoted the intercultural approach
- The City of Melton (2009) and the City of Ballarat (2010) were the first Australian cities to incorporate intercultural principles
- Since 2017, 4 cities have joined the Intercultural Cities (ICC) program:
City of Melton, City of Ballarat, City Maribyrnong, City of Salisbury

State and Federal governments are catching up

- In 2021, South Australia adopted a ‘Multiculturalism and Interculturalism Charter’
- In 2025, Victoria’s multicultural review strongly endorsed intercultural initiatives
- In 2024, the Federal government’s multicultural review stressed the need for intercultural education

Conclusion

Interculturalism is assisting Australia deal with new challenges associated with increasing diversity

- strengthens existing multicultural policies

Challenges:

- Overcoming resistance to 'new' approaches in a country where multiculturalism is seen as successful
- Creating more awareness of what interculturalism can contribute

Provincial governments can play an important role in fostering intercultural initiatives:

- Education and awareness
- Funding
- Legislating intercultural approaches in cities