Inquiry into the Administration and Management of the
2017 State General Election
Office of Multicultural Interests’ Submission
August 2017

Background

The Western Australian Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries’ Office of Multicultural Interests (OMI) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee’s Inquiry into the Administration and Management of the 2017 State General Election (the Inquiry).

OMI’s key role is to assist the Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests and the State Government to achieve the full potential of multiculturalism. OMI develops strategies that include everyone—culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) communities, the wider community, business and industry groups, government and non-government agencies—to help develop a society that values and maximises the benefits of its cultural diversity. Its strategies assist organisations to develop policies, programs and services that are accessible and responsive to the needs of a diverse community.

OMI provides information, advice, funding, training and support to communities and community organisations to help build strong communities that maintain and share their diverse cultures and participate actively in all aspects of Western Australian life.

With 32 per cent of Western Australians born overseas and 17 per cent born in non-main English speaking countries, it is important that CaLD communities are supported to engage in civic participation. OMI's Strategic Plan 2014–18 identifies promotion of active citizenship and representation in the democratic process as one of the main strategies in facilitating full participation by CaLD communities in social, economic, cultural and civic activities.

Accordingly, in 2014, OMI met with the Constitutional Centre of Western Australia, Electoral Education Centre and Australia Day WA to discuss ways to increase engagement of CaLD community members in civic life. OMI subsequently developed a civics and citizenship program to:

- raise members of CaLD communities’ awareness of Australia’s political system, citizens’ rights and responsibilities, and how to be involved in government decision-making processes
- increase the participation of people from CaLD backgrounds in decision-making processes, and social and civic life
- promote active citizenship and representation in democratic processes.

The program includes metropolitan and regional civics and citizenship workshops (to be undertaken by Australia Day WA from 2017–18 as part of its contract with OMI) and a partnership with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and Western Australian Electoral Commission (WAEC) to identify strategies to increase the voting rate of people from CaLD backgrounds.

The first civics and citizenship workshops were held at the Constitutional Centre of WA in May 2015 and have continued in subsequent years. The workshops cover a range of topics, including:

- how to enrol to vote and how to become a candidate for election
- how Australian and Western Australian Parliamentary systems work and how laws are made
- the Australian Constitution
- who Australia’s main political parties are
- how to make your voice heard and make your vote count.

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1 32.2 per cent of the Western Australian population in 2016 was born overseas.
OMI’s engagement with the WAEC, Constitution Centre and Electoral Education Centre has been ongoing particularly in relation to the local government elections held in 2015, the Federal election in 2016 and the State election in 2017.

In 2016, OMI hosted three interns from the McCusker Centre for Citizenship to undertake research and project work in relation to CaLD participation in civics and citizenship activities. The research projects aimed to examine community engagement and communication strategies that are effective in targeting CaLD communities, (cognisant of the role and capacity of the AEC and the WAEC), and to identify effective engagement strategies for CaLD young people.

Prior to the March 2017 State General Election, OMI held three workshops (one in November and two in February) as part of its civics and citizenship program. A workshop targeting CaLD young people was piloted in June 2017.

1. The participation of communities with traditionally low levels of enrolment or turn out, and/or high levels of informality

What factors affect rates of enrolment, turnout, and informality in Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities and among young people?

Research suggests that both voter turnout and higher rates of informal voting occur in areas of lower socioeconomic background. This finding is consistent with feedback from the WAEC regarding areas in which the highest rates of informal voting were recorded in the 2013 State election. This led to a partnership between the WAEC and OMI and development of its Ambassador Program to support the 2017 State election.

Information gathered through OMI’s civics and citizenship program and related research activities suggests that rates of informal voting were of greater concern than voter turnout in relation to people from CaLD backgrounds. While it might be expected that CaLD voter turnout may be affected by acclimatisation and communication difficulties, this is mitigated by the compulsory nature of the Australian voting system. However, issues impacting on informality rates were identified that relate to:

- political efficacy—both ‘internal efficacy’ (a voter’s sense of political competence) and ‘external efficacy’ (a belief that government is responsive to attempted influence)
- awareness of political systems and processes—which is connected to levels of internal efficacy and can be affected by voters’ levels of English language and computer literacy, and access to information
- group contacts—connections with and/or membership of community groups that support civic and political activism.

Political efficacy

In Australia, it has been noted that

“a strong sense of efficacy, both internal and external, is an important motivator for voting…[Indeed], abstainers tend to perceive government as unresponsive and accordingly fail to vote, in the belief that their vote will be ignored”.

Not only does political efficacy have an effect on voter turnout, but it has also been demonstrated that it is “the most significant factor for voting potential among immigrant communities”.

This suggests that any program that seeks to redress CaLD informality must place equal emphasis on both the informational aspects of voting—the formal process of casting a ballot—and the personal aspect of voting—how the individual can make a difference through participation.

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3 Ibid.
The three McCusker Centre for Citizenship interns examined civics and voting-related attitudes and experiences among WA CaLD community members. Two surveys were undertaken, one of which targeted young people.

The findings identified a strong demand in the CaLD community to more effectively express their interests through the political process: more than 65 per cent of respondents to the general survey, and almost 95 per cent of CaLD young people surveyed, expressed a desire to “learn how to make [their] voice heard”. Slightly fewer young people (87 per cent) expressed interest in learning about how to vote formally, with 80 per cent wanting to learn more about the election process.

One survey respondent highlighted the impact that experiences in their country of origin could have on their perception of the legitimacy of the political process, noting that some members of the community might be “scared to vote or ask questions because of past experience in old country” [sic]. This underscores the importance of community education regarding civics and the political process.

**Awareness of political systems processes**

Both anecdotal and survey findings indicate that general political knowledge of the Australian electoral system among some CaLD community members is limited. The OMI survey found that:

- almost 30 per cent of respondents claimed they knew only “a little” about the subject
- 85 per cent were interested in learning more about the topic, particularly civic participation, the Australian constitution, citizens’ rights and responsibilities, and the Australian parliamentary system
- 90 per cent supported the provision of more information on how to be actively involved in civics and citizenship.

Given the diversity within the CaLD population in terms of cultural background, year of arrival, and pre-arrival and settlement experiences, it is important to consider a range of communication formats and channels. A mixture of approaches such as print media, posters, television and radio commentary, social media and advertising is more effective than information programs that use only one or two communication methods. Techniques to assist people with low literacy skills can include using plain English, graphics such as international signs and symbols, and face-to-face communication using bilingual workers.

OMI survey data suggest that both written (pamphlet and poster) and visual (video and picture) aids are the preferred media in which to receive information about voting and elections. For those who are computer literate, engagement via the internet and other social media is suggested.

In terms of specific feedback, several respondents noted a need for earlier provision of voting material with a suggestion that information be provided for newcomers at citizenship ceremonies.

Face-to-face communication strategies have been found to be the most effective in reaching CaLD communities. A majority (67%) of CaLD electors said they would be interested in attending a session where representatives of the electoral commission explained the voting process in English or in their preferred language. Another respondent noted that “[l]anguage is the key for those who are not proficient in English”, with others calling for “more one-on-one sessions in their preferred languages”.

An other than English language background appears to be a significant impediment to voting successfully. The AEC notes that “[p]oor English proficiency continues to be associated with an increased propensity to vote informally”\(^5\), while Hill and Young assert that “being a voter from a non-English speaking background is a, if not the, major predictor of informal voting”\(^6\).

**Group contacts**

CaLD community organisations are key to much of OMI’s work as a conduit to their members and a vital source of advice in the design and delivery of information and programs. Accordingly, OMI has worked with the WAEC to provide outreach to these groups to support community education programs regarding the electoral process.

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\(^6\) Ibid, p. 519.
The role that CaLD organisations play as sources of political and informational capital indicates that any attempt to reduce informal voting among CaLD communities must recognise the importance of trusted group and community ties. The literature highlights the importance of CaLD community organisations, groups and ethnic associations in building social trust and tolerance, which in turn “create the basis for political participation”. The relevance to migrant populations in this respect has also been noted.

A 2013 UK study noted that “belonging to an ethnic or cultural association is significantly related to signing a petition, participating in protests and joining boycotts”. Similarly, a 2011 US study observed that membership in ethnic organisations among Asian Americans increased their probability of participating in political activities.

CaLD organisations can become “fertile ground for political mobilisation because they facilitate the accumulation of resources that foster political participation such as civic skills, knowledge, political information, social capital or shared identities”. Even within a compulsory voting jurisdiction, the role that CaLD organisations play in terms of sources of political and informational capital indicates that any attempt to reduce informality among CaLD communities must recognise the importance of trusted group and community ties.

2. What initiatives have (WA and) other jurisdictions adopted to address low enrolment or turnout and high levels of informality?

OMI is aware of the following initiatives to address low enrolment or turnout, and/or high levels of informality.

**Western Australia**

OMI notes that the WAEC is “committed to ensuring that all people within the community are given every opportunity to participate in the electoral process and to access the Commission’s services”. A factsheet detailing how to vote at a State election, and instructions on how to complete Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council ballot papers are available on the WAEC website in Arabic, Bosnian, Burmese, Chinese (simplified and traditional), Croatian, Dari, French, Greek, Indonesian, Italian, Karen, Khmer, Korean, Macedonian, Malay, Polish, Persian, Portuguese, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, Swahili, Thai and Vietnamese.

As noted above, OMI has partnered with the WAEC for its civics and citizenship workshops. OMI also supported WAEC in the development of its Ambassador Program in advance of the 2017 State election, connecting the WAEC to CaLD community groups and non-government organisations to identify participants in the target areas of Mirrabooka and Girrawheen. These areas were identified as those in which the highest proportion of informal votes were lodged during the 2013 State election.

The program resulted in training of around 30 community members proficient in 25 languages of whom 20 were subsequently employed on election day to assist at relevant polling sites.

On voting day, the WAEC polling staff wear stickers identifying that they are able to speak languages other than English.

The WAEC also offers an interpreter service via the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) in the ‘elector assistance’ section of its website. This information is provided in English only, but includes a translator/interpreter icon.

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8. Ibid., p. 3.
**Victoria**

**Democracy Ambassador Program**

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) “works to ensure that community members understand their democratic rights and responsibilities, and learn how to enrol and vote correctly” and “works in partnership with ethno-specific service providers, community members and leaders, providing culturally responsive services and promoting electoral participation and active citizenship”. As part of its focus on CaLD communities, the VEC:

- utilises the expertise of a CaLD Advisory Group comprising government and non-government CaLD workers and community members to develop its community engagement and electoral services
- runs community workshops on how to vote correctly, as part of its electoral outreach program—on request, Community Educators facilitate sessions with community groups throughout Victoria and in the following languages: Arabic, Chollo, Dari, Dinka, Egyptian, Hazaragi, Kindi, Parsi, Punjabi, Nuer, Tigrinya, Sudanese, Sudanese Arabic and Urdu
- runs active citizenship workshops ‘Be Heard’ and ‘Be Informed’ for community leaders to build political literacy and capacity to affect change in communities with a view to increasing electoral participation
- provides information on its website (English only) encouraging members of CaLD communities to apply for casual employment during elections
- has developed a multimedia ‘All About Voting’ education kit (English only) for people newly arrived to Australia that includes information on enrolling to vote, government representatives, and voting in local council, State and Federal elections
- has a CaLD Communities Officer that the public can contact with enquiries
- provides information in multiple languages, linked to an interpreter icon, regarding interpreter and translator assistance on the homepage of its website that is also available in audio format by clicking a ‘ReadSpeaker’ icon on the page.

The VEC also has an Ambassadors Program that was used for the 2014 State election, 2016 local government elections and 2018 State election. The VEC ‘Democracy Ambassadors’ program was first piloted prior to the 2014 Victorian State election and initially targeted emerging CaLD communities from the Horn of Africa including Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan.

The VEC trained members of these communities to become ‘Community Educators’, responsible for meeting with community groups before the election, and running free sessions about elections and voting in Amharic, Arabic, Dinka, Kiswahili, Nuer and Tigrinya. In 2014, Afghan and Indian communities were added to the program for the 2016 local government elections. Further expansions of the program are expected before the 2018 State elections. The program responds to a need for electoral education, particularly within emerging communities, recognising that CaLD communities overall are “highly motivated to become involved” and may not have the infrastructure and communications networks of more established communities.

The VEC is proposing a second phase of the program, in which electoral education is coupled with “ways of identifying community issues and seeking remedies other than through the ballot box” to cultivate political interest at all levels, and strengthen internal and external political efficacy.

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15 Ibid.

16 State and Territory Electoral Commissions, *Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Information and Education Strategies*. 

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The VEC ‘Driving Votes’ campaign was launched prior to the 2014 State election, and designed “to engage youth and CaLD, reinforcing awareness about the upcoming election and the importance of correct enrolling”.\(^\text{17}\) A VEC-branded van was deployed to 20 destinations across greater Melbourne and regional Victoria that had historically lower levels of turnout and formality\(^\text{18}\), for one month.\(^\text{19}\)

The van was equipped to enable voters to check their enrolment, access educational resources and forms, and ask questions.\(^\text{20}\) Over the course of the campaign, 55,655 resource materials were distributed, and 29,647 direction interactions with electors occurred.\(^\text{21}\) Feedback on the program praised “the convenience factor” and the VEC’s willingness “to put a public face on the electoral process”.\(^\text{22}\)

**New South Wales**

The Electoral Commission NSW (ECNSW) makes the following information resources available in different languages on its website:

- State by-election instructions for voting
- Voting at the NSW State Election
- There are three different elections in Australia
- Instructions for voting on election day at NSW State Elections
- Instructions for voting and local government elections
- Put your name on the list to vote at elections.

Selected materials (not all) are translated into Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, Chinese, Croatian, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Khmer, Korean, Lao, Macedonian, Portuguese, Samoan, Serbian, Spanish, Tagalog, Turkish and Vietnamese.\(^\text{23}\)

The commission also offers access to TIS (English only) via the ‘contact us’ page on its website.

**South Australia**

The Electoral Commission of South Australia (ECSA) states a commitment “to making our site more accessible to South Australian electors” and makes the following information resources available in different languages in the ‘multilingual’ section of its website:

- Postal voting guide (local and State elections)
- Postal voting guide—Adelaide City Council
- Enrolling and voting (State elections)
- English ballot paper instructions
- Storyboard on voting at State elections.


\(^{20}\) Victorian Electoral Commission, *Driving Votes rolls to a close*.


\(^{22}\) Ibid.

Selected materials (not all) are translated into Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dinka, French, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Khmer, Korean, Persian, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Swahili and Vietnamese. ECSA has also published a ‘New citizens’ brochure’ that explains the enrolment process. The publication is in English and refers readers to the abovementioned ‘multilingual’ section of the ECSA website.

ECSA also offers access to TIS via the ‘multilingual’ page on its website. Information is provided in multiple languages, although English is required in order to reach the page where the information is located.

Queensland
The Electoral Commission Queensland (ECQ) offers access to TIS via the ‘contact us’ page on its website. Information is provided in multiple languages, although English is required in order to reach the page where the information is located.

Northern Territory
The Northern Territory Electoral Commission (NTEC) offers free “customised presentations, information and resources to community groups, including those who have English as a second language.” Information about ‘Interpreting and translating service NT’ is provided in English only on the ‘Need Help to Vote?’ page of the website. This is an external service and may be subject to a fee.

Tasmania
No information is available from the Tasmanian Electoral Commission (TEC) for CaLD voters. The TEC relies on community organisations to support education, and translating and interpreting for voters from CaLD communities.

Commonwealth
The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) adopted a multi-pronged communications strategy aiming to meet CaLD elector needs in the 2016 Federal election:

- before the election, a language review was undertaken to determine priority languages for the translation of election materials. Advertisements were produced in 28 languages for radio, printed announcements in 19 languages were distributed via ethnic media, TV advertisements were created in eight languages, and advertisements for online distribution were created in five languages

- a free Community Electoral Education Kit (CEEK) was also produced, intended primarily for community groups, and made available in May 2016. The web location of the kit received 2516 page views in the two months before the July election. The CEEK is a potentially valuable resource, however, is reliant on public awareness, access and distribution for success

- the Australian Libraries and Information Association (ALIA) was contracted to oversee the delivery of the Community Education in Libraries Initiative (CELI), which used the CEEK to deliver 115 electoral information sessions in 17 languages to CaLD groups in local library branches in 63 locations. Feedback on both the CELI and CEEK was positive (87.2% and 98%, respectively). The delivery of election education benefits from the involvement of community leaders in development and delivery for best outcomes

- more than 200 CaLD Voter Information Officers (VIOs), many of whom were multilingual, were deployed at polling places with historically high levels of informality, distributing translated voter information and engaging with voters as they queued

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• copies of the official ‘How to Vote’ guide were provided at every polling place in multiple languages.

In the lead-up to the 2010 Federal election, the AEC piloted a community engagement strategy to “increase voter knowledge in relation to casting a formal vote”. The strategy targeted areas with high levels of informality, “where it is assumed that the majority of the informal votes may be cast unintentionally”.

The AEC contracted consultants Cultural Perspectives to conduct the program, who used bilingual educators “proficient in the identified target language groups”, with preference given to those with established community networks. The strategy included delivery of 90 community education workshops with 1772 participants across 13 language groups in the three-week period leading up to the 2010 Federal election. Each workshop conducted by the consultants was attended by an AEC staff member, who provided technical expertise and support for the bilingual educator.

3. How effective was the Commission’s Ambassador Program during the 2017 election?

OMI understands that the pilot Ambassador Program was considered a success and is likely to have contributed to an improvement in the rate of informal votes. Accordingly, OMI would support the WAEC’s plans to expand the program in future years to include a broader geographical reach with consideration given to building on the knowledge and skills learned by participants to contribute to further civics and citizenship education and awareness in their respective communities.

4. Recommendations

In addressing low enrolment and turnout rates and high levels of informality, OMI reaffirms the significance of the following recommendations, made by the WAEC in its 2015 report ‘CaLD Electors—Strategies & Initiatives’:

• Recommendation 4: to “[u]se social media channels such as YouTube and Facebook to target CaLD electors (especially younger voters) and to make presentations/instructional videos readily available online”.

• Recommendation 7: to “[d]evelop a suite of Easy English resources or guideline material that can be used by community advocates/ambassadors when working in their community”.

• Recommendation 8: to “[p]roduce a brochure targeting CaLD electors that is written in Easy English and uses graphic devices/symbols, for issue at citizenship ceremonies and community presentations, plus for distribution to CaLD community groups”.

In consideration of the terms of the Inquiry and the research mentioned above, OMI makes the following additional recommendations with regard to improving participation via community engagement:

1. Maintain and expand the Ambassador Program, as noted above.

2. Consider a targeted communications strategy and targeted collaboration with OMI, CaLD service providers and community organisations to support the improved distribution of existing multilingual resource materials and education opportunities to CaLD communities and electorates with low enrolment and turn out rates and high levels of informality.

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30 Ibid.
3. Consider other opportunities to improve the accessibility of multilingual resources for newcomers, for example, by:
   a. working with DIBP to amend the Citizenship Ceremonies Code to encourage or mandate the provision of multilingual electoral information and forms at citizenship ceremonies
   b. leveraging events such as Australia Day, Citizenship Day, Harmony Week and ethnic community celebrations
   c. exploring opportunities to link with local governments in relevant areas—particularly making use of public libraries.

4. Allow sufficient time for information to be distributed and explained to CaLD communities prior to elections.

5. Work with Australia Day WA, the Constitution Centre and McCusker Centre for Citizenship to continue and expand engagement with and education of CaLD community members regarding civic and citizenship.

6. Ensure that any presentations to CaLD communities focus equally on enhancing perceptions of external and internal political efficacy (the responsivity of the system along with voting formalities).