

The Older Migrants Forum

Funded by the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia and facilitated by Welcome to Australia



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The International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding

The International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding (MnM Centre) was officially launched in 2008 by its Patron, the Honourable Bob Hawke AC.

The MnM Centre is one of the most prominent of UniSA's Hawke Research Institute's research centres. The HRI, with its emphasis on international relations and social justice, provides a crucial global platform for the work of the MnM Centre. It provides assistance through international linkages and opportunities for interdisciplinary research projects, symposia and workshops involving scholars with expertise in areas such as community conflict resolution, international studies and reconciliation.

The vision of the MnM Centre is to be an internationally significant research centre, devoted to understanding and transcending the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, with a strong socio-cultural focus that fosters informed relationships between cultures and identities. The centre provides a unique forum in which scholars and PhD students develop and disseminate ideas within the framework of a broader social justice agenda.

Intercultural understanding, however, is not simply a matter of gaining better knowledge or developing empathy but also changing the original terms of reference by which misunderstandings are generated: our scholars do this by pioneering critical scholarship and creating opportunities for open dialogue and community engagement. Wherever possible, the research of the centre is made accessible to external stakeholders to provide opportunities to engage in dialogue with the aim of continually building greater understanding and influencing positive change.

The MnM Centre's research addresses cross-cultural issues, reflects commitment to reconciliation and develops rational approaches to addressing and overcoming prejudices about diversity. Thus the focus of the MnM Centre's work – its research, its collaboration with other programs and people at the University of South Australia, and its engagement with local and international partners and communities – is identifying ways in which different communities can, should and do encounter and interact with each other.

Welcome to Australia

Welcome to Australia exists to engage everyday Australians in the task of cultivating a culture of welcome in our nation. The Australia we love is known for its diversity, compassion, generosity and commitment to giving all people a fair go. We'd like to find many different ways that individuals, families, businesses and other organisations can work together to continue to develop these values in our communities, work places, schools and institutions.

We also believe that there are thousands of Australians who don't care too much for politics and don't know a great deal about immigration policy - but who do know they care about people. We believe that cultural diversity should be celebrated for the beauty and depth it adds to our society and that no matter who you are, where you're from or how you arrived - you're a person who deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. We hope to coordinate a range of ways in which people can express these concepts in practical, meaningful and positive ways.

While some of us have strong opinions about policies to do with asylum seeking, refugees and migration, we believe that the most effective way of creating social and policy change in this area is to facilitate opportunities for authentic relationships to be built in which people of differing backgrounds share their stories. In other words - we believe that knowing someone personally and hearing their story, hopes and dreams will have more impact on a person's views on these contentious issues than any policy, economic or political debate. We'd like to create a loud, public voice of positivity which changes the public conversation by virtue of its volume and values.

Introduction

The Older Migrants Forum was held in Adelaide on 27 November 2015 at the office of the Multicultural Communities Council of South Australia. The forum was chaired by Mohammad Al-Khafaji, Chief Executive Officer: Welcome to Australia, with group discussions facilitated by Dr Amrita Malhi, Research Fellow, University of South Australia, and Leah Marrone, Welcome to Australia.

The forum was devised as a pilot project aimed at testing the value of intercultural discussions between established migrant communities (in this case, mainly represented by post-WWII Greek and Italian migrants) and members of new and emerging communities (comprising migrants from Indonesia, Sierra Leone and Egypt).

The forum provided an opportunity for elder community members to share their experiences of arriving in Australia and navigating their new communities, the skills that they had developed to develop a sense of belonging, some of the fears that they experienced and how they overcame them, and ideas about how local and state governments could contribute to the development of necessary services, particularly as they aged.

A particular focus of discussions centred on what kinds of facilities and support structures are most vital for ageing migrant communities. Here, a wide range of views was expressed around whether services should be culturally-specific, or more intercultural in orientation, or a flexible combination of both. For example, aged communities with Muslim members would expect Halal food to be available in aged care facilities, and elders who prefer a particular language other than English might wish to be immersed in that linguistic experience. On the other hand, elders may also possess very strong intercultural skills after a lifetime in Australia, and those who are bi- or multi-lingual may not wish to be grouped with others who only speak their “community” language.

In navigating these cross-cutting issues, discussions also highlighted how established communities can help the newly emerging communities; how new and emerging migrant communities can best access and learn from the experiences of older migrant communities; and on creating opportunities for communities to come together and participate in intercultural interaction.

Key outcomes

1. **Provision of services:** participants stressed the imperative of easy accessibility to services, in particular those related to medical needs, transport availability, cultural gatherings, and ways of accessing more help to stay at home.
2. **Culturally specific aging support:** this support must acknowledge the importance of people's cultural heritage and how the provision of it can influence positive ageing experiences.
3. **Intercultural aging forum:** regular forums can provide opportunities for elderly migrant communities (established as well as new and emerging communities) to come together and learn from each other's experiences.

Discussion

The forum provided an informal opportunity for migrants to come together and share their experiences of settling in Adelaide. Some participants from established communities had migrated to Australia during the 1960s and were able to contextualise their experiences through stories about travelling to and settling in Australia, finding jobs, maintaining links to their cultures, overcoming language and cultural barriers, and some of the challenges that manifest with ageing.

All migrants stressed that language was the singular most difficult barrier to initially overcome, however with waves of migration from the same home countries, communities began to form and festivals emerged as a prominent way of maintaining cultural links, customs and heritage. In addition to festivals and questions of basic access to culture however, the question of viable models for the provision of essential services also emerged as key questions for these communities.

Some younger cohorts of migrants are finding that only now are individuals beginning to age sufficiently for aged care to emerge as an issue for them. For example, one forum participant who migrated from Indonesia leads informal community gatherings at which the question of ageing is now increasingly a topic for discussion. These gatherings are also designed as supportive forums for new arrivals from Indonesia.

One other participant, a migrant from Sierra Leone, stressed that as a member of a young cohort, his biggest challenges have included finding work, adjusting to Australian life, adapting to having left most family members behind, and accommodating to the knowledge that he will never move back to Sierra Leone. This participant's contributions led to a discussion about the changing role of women in migrant communities, and in the wider Australian community more generally. Specifically, aged migrants in Australia often find themselves to be economically inactive members of two-income families, meaning that daughters and daughters-in-law are simply not available to carry caring responsibilities for aged family members. This can come as a surprise for the aged, who find themselves asked to adapt to new models for aged care that do not rely solely on family members, or indeed on people who look and sound like them.

Greek participants responded that their elderly relatives had also once realised that they would need to look beyond family-based support for the aged. As a large community, however, Greeks have been able to establish aged care services that are predominantly patronised by members of the Greek community. Greek participants stressed that "Greek" facilities also take in members of other communities, e.g. "Skips" who only speak English. They stated that the nursing home was created by the community because it was needed in terms of language and culture, as a result they received a grant from the government. As Australia's migrant population becomes increasingly diverse, however, smaller communities may not be able to found viable facilities if they focus on creating culturally-specific environments, again raising the question of interculturality as a new focus.

In terms of nursing homes, many stated that they did not mind going to an aged care service, but do wish to see that restrictions around when and how many people can visit, and the food they can bring in, be lifted. However for some participants there was the concern that as they get old they will end up in nursing homes, being looked after by "different" people. Therefore there is the push to keep government funding as a necessity to have elderly people living in their own homes, been looked after by mostly their families. Thus here the conversation of intercultural needs is important, as newly emerging communities realise that many elderly communities share this fear. Therefore having a dialogue will provide a space where these communities can come together and seek out ways in which other communities have managed to overcome this fear.

Conclusion and recommendations

An initial assessment of the pilot highlights that migrants from different communities can strongly benefit from being brought together to compare experiences. As the discussion proceeded, participants also discussed questions of identity, different migration channels (e.g. refugee migration vs skilled migration), the influence of the media, violent extremism and the War on Terror, and the ways in which these questions can and do form obstacles to intercultural interaction. Yet the experience of the pilot appeared to demonstrate that these questions can be addressed by skilled discussion facilitators in the process of “comparing notes” about how to structure migrant services. In the course of this discussion, questions such as resource parity and access to services were raised and addressed in a constructive manner. Indeed, participants from established communities were both interested in, and open to, the idea of mentoring others from new and emerging communities to establish themselves in Australia.

One desire that was expressed by participants included the notion of “intercultural matchmaking”, where government sets the tone and creates the opportunities for members from different communities to gather together to discuss different points of view on important questions such as aged care. Effectively, participants wished for more experiences like the pilot, in which formal and informal community leaders could discuss how best to meet community needs, including in partnerships with other communities.

Participants also expressed an interest in learning how to use existing public and private services as flexibly as possible, so that families and communities are also involved in adapting “mainstream” services to suit the needs of smaller communities who may not be able to establish single-community aged care facilities. Access to family, language, culture and food came up often as key priorities for the elderly.

Therefore, the key recommendation of this pilot is that intercultural discussions of this kind become a firm and systematic part of the government and SAMEAC agenda for multiculturalism and social cohesion.