

Achieving Access & Equity

Office of Multicultural Affairs *Achieving Access and Equity, A Second Edition Guide for the Australian Public Service* Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994, pp i and 1-5.

One of the key strategies of OMA and the Government involved detailed plans inside government departments. This guide (1994) provides an introduction to that process.

Foreword by the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Multicultural Affairs

This Government seeks to build an Australia which is fair, strong, prosperous and united in its purpose and outlook.

Such a goal can only be achieved if policy developers and program managers in the Australian Public Service deal with all Australians in an even-handed manner. It is particularly important, in programs and services delivered by government agencies to the public, to ensure equality of opportunity and equity in outcomes.

This Government is firmly committed to ensuring that all Australians, irrespective of their race, culture, religion or first language, are able to benefit equitably from the resources it manages on behalf of the community.

To this end, the Government adopted the Access and Equity Strategy in 1985 for implementation throughout the Australian Public Service. The Strategy was evaluated in 1991-92. The recommendations of the Evaluation Report were endorsed by Government and constitute the current Access and Equity Strategy. The recommendations stipulated ways in which the Strategy could be improved and all Commonwealth departments

and agencies are required to implement them.

The Evaluation highlighted the importance of equitable program outcomes. Equity is a fundamental principle of democratic governance and a just social system. In the form of 'a fair go', equity is a basic principle of the Government's social justice policy.

For managers it is important to understand that equity is not simply equality of treatment. Equity policies recognise that citizens are different in their needs, interests and values. Treating everybody the same may simply perpetuate existing inequalities. The goal is a greater social equality overall, but taking account of the reality of difference.

Achieving Access and Equity - A Second Edition Guide for the Australian Public Service will provide public service managers with an invaluable tool for creating accessible services and achieving equitable outcomes for those who use the services. It updates A&E policy and practice and particularly sharpens the focus on A&E practice at the client contact level. I trust that it will go a long way towards ensuring the Access and Equity Strategy continues to be implemented with vigour by all Commonwealth departments and agencies.

Nick Bolkus

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Chapter 1: Overview

1.1 What is Access and Equity ?

Two key social justice objectives of the Commonwealth Government are to ensure that:

- all Australians can access its programs and services with equal ease; and
- all Australians receive a fair share of the resources delivered through Commonwealth programs.

The concept of access implies that all who are entitled to a public service should face no barriers that make their situation inequitable to others so entitled.

Equity implies that all who are entitled to government provision should be equally likely to receive it.

The Access and Equity (A&E) Strategy began in 1985 as a policy response to the provision of services to people of non-English speaking background, ie to persons coming from a country where the national or commonly used language is not English. In 1989 the Strategy was formally extended to include all groups who may face barriers of race, religion, language or culture, including Australian-born people of non-English speaking background (NESB2) and Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, with a continuing emphasis on the double disadvantage which may be faced by women and the ethnic disabled.

In the past, government departments and agencies have not always communicated effectively with many of their clients who may not speak, read and write English well enough to find out about and use entitlements and services on a par with other Australians. They have not always factored in to program design and delivery that many overseas-born Australians lack familiarity with the predominant Australian cultural norms and lack understanding of the role of government, as well

as having different cultural values and modes of behaviour. Many Australians still experience insensitivity towards their religious obligations including dress codes and observances. Many suffer racial stereotyping, bias and prejudice.

The Commonwealth Government is intent on removing language, cultural, religious and racial barriers from its interactions with the Australian community. It wants all Australians to receive a fair go and a fair share, regardless of their background.

To achieve this goal, the Government has placed a range of requirements and obligations, designed to remove these barriers, on its own departments and agencies. Essentially the A&E Strategy consists of this series of requirements. They encourage departments and agencies to take steps to reflect the diversity of their client base - the Australian community - in the way they conduct their business. These requirements, together with associated guidelines and activities, make up what is known as the Commonwealth Access and Equity Strategy.

The A&E Strategy primarily targets barriers faced by Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, non-English speaking background migrants, their families and their communities.

The A&E Strategy is not designed to give these target groups any special advantage. It is designed to enhance program design and delivery arrangements so that they effectively and efficiently account for client diversity.

The overriding goal of the Commonwealth A&E Strategy is to put the onus on government departments and agencies to ensure an even-handed approach to all clients and client groups in particular, and the public in general. Good management practice and client orientation are as much the objective as social justice.

A&E requirements are designed to encourage departments and agencies to address client diversity more effectively through planning, consultation, participation, staff training,

information strategies, language services, data collection, evaluation and reporting. The program logic of the A&E Strategy is set out in Appendix A, the meaning of 'access' in Appendix B and the meaning of 'equity' in Appendix C.

1.2 Why We Need an Access And Equity Strategy

Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders occupy a unique place in our cultural heritage. In 1991 Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders numbered 265,378 or 1.6 per cent of the total population. In certain areas indigenous Australians make up a much higher proportion. For example, in the Northern Territory they make up nearly one-quarter of the population.

Over the past two hundred years, Australia has attracted people from all parts of the world. Following the major post-war waves of immigrants to Australia, the proportion of our citizens and permanent residents from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) rose dramatically.

Today, nearly one in four Australians is an immigrant from a non-English speaking background or the child of an immigrant from a non-English speaking background:

- nearly four million Australians were born overseas, over half of them from non-English speaking backgrounds;
- almost two in five Australians have at least one parent born overseas; and
- in excess of 15 per cent of people over the age of five speak a language other than English at home with 3 per cent of the total Australian population either unable to speak the English language well or at all.

Australia is an ethnically and linguistically diverse or multicultural society.

This diversity of language, religion, race and culture in our population presents a challenge to

government to deliver services in ways that are relevant, meaningful and easily accessed by all Australians from whatever backgrounds.

The A&E Strategy is the Government's policy response to this diversity. While Aboriginal and ethno-specific services exist, the Government seeks to ensure that all services are so developed that all members of the community can fully participate in its programs.

The A&E Strategy promotes measures such as:

- provision of information about government services in languages other than English;
- greater use of bilingual staff and interpreters;
- training staff to be sensitive to the different cultural backgrounds of clients; and
- consulting with client groups.

These sorts of measures are intended to progressively erode language, cultural, religious and racial barriers to access and equity in the delivery of government programs and provision of services.

1.3 How the Access and Equity Strategy Developed

In recent decades there has emerged a clear need to manage diversity in the population in order to maximise economic benefits for the community as a whole, foster social cohesion and ensure that all Australians get a fair go.

Many Commonwealth departments and agencies have progressively modified and augmented their program and service delivery arrangements to reflect their increasingly diverse client base. At a broader governmental level, there have been several reviews of service delivery to NESB Australians, the most well-known of which was the 1978 Galbally Report.

In 1985 the Government decided to bring all Commonwealth activity designed to make mainstream programs and services accessible and

usable by NESB immigrant Australians under the umbrella of the A&E Strategy. This Strategy absorbed and reinforced previously related activities and provided a broader policy context for meeting A&E objectives.

The A&E Strategy was initially coordinated by the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and later taken up by the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) upon its creation in 1987. Initially the Strategy focused on the main service delivery departments and their NESB immigrant clients. This focus later broadened to include all Commonwealth departments and agencies. In 1989, as part of the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, the Strategy was strengthened to include Aboriginal peoples, Torres Strait Islanders and also second generation NESB migrants. The double disadvantage experienced by NESB women and NESB people with disabilities was also highlighted.

It is generally recognised that during these early stages the Strategy assisted departments more with the implementation of 'access' than with making operational the concept of 'equity'.

While the A&E Strategy has specific objectives, mechanisms and target groups, it is also part of the Government's Social Justice Strategy which seeks to redress broader disadvantage across Australian society.

The most recent changes to the A&E Strategy resulted from the 1991-92 major cross-portfolio evaluation of the Strategy.

1.4 The 1991-92 Evaluation of the Strategy

After over five years in operation, the Government decided that a major cross-portfolio evaluation of the A&E Strategy should commence in 1991.

The Evaluation set out to establish whether the A&E Strategy had improved the delivery of government programs to clients facing linguistic, cultural, religious and racial barriers.

While this Evaluation was concerned with how well departments and agencies were performing generally in delivering their programs and services to A&E target groups, its main focus was on the Strategy itself. The core concern was whether the A&E Strategy was making a difference or adding value to the manner in which Australian Public Service programs and services were overcoming language, cultural, racial and religious barriers.

The scope of the Evaluation embraced the Australian Public Service and its myriad roles, functions and activities. All Commonwealth departments and a selection of key agencies were included. Their A&E performance was examined at all levels from central offices in Canberra to counter staff dealing with the public in metropolitan and rural settings.

The Evaluation involved public submissions, community consultations, an extensive research program, staff surveys, and inputs from all Commonwealth departments and key agencies. It was conducted by a Task force within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet working to an interdepartmental Steering Committee. Represented on the Steering Committee were the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission; the Departments of Employment, Education and Training; the then Health, Housing and Community Services, Social Security; Finance; Immigration and Ethnic Affairs; and the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The Evaluation Task force reported its key findings, conclusions and recommendations to the Government in October 1992 (see Appendix D). A significant finding of the Evaluation was the need for a shift of emphasis from planning to results: a shift from a 'top-down' approach to implementation to one that focused more directly on making a difference to the way things happen 'over the counter' - that is, at the interface with clients. Also identified was the need for a more systematic and comprehensive approach to A&E training for staff at all levels. All Commonwealth public servants must be equipped with the skills to

respond professionally and flexibly to their diverse clientele.

Government endorsed the A&E Evaluation Report and its forty-three recommendations which now provide the current framework for ongoing implementation of the Strategy. The key characteristic of the new A&E regime is concern for results and outcomes. The cornerstone of monitoring and accountability under the new regime is the A&E Annual Report, the first of which was tabled in Parliament by the Prime Minister in November 1993. The report assessed the A&E performance of individual departments and their programs.

1.5 Current Access and Equity Requirements

Following the 1992 Evaluation of the A&E Strategy, the Commonwealth Government decided that all its departments and agencies should meet the following Access and Equity requirements:

- **Planning:** incorporate A&E objectives into corporate planning and all relevant program and service delivery planning;
- **Evaluation and audit:** incorporate A&E performance into all relevant internal and external evaluations and audits;
- **Performance indicators:** collect and use data relevant to A&E, including ethnicity and cost data, in program planning, implementation and evaluation;
- **Public accountability:** provide information on A&E performance in annual reports, program performance statements and to OMA for an annual A&E report to the Prime Minister for tabling in Parliament;
- **Language services:** implement measures to overcome communication barriers for clients and potential clients who do not speak, understand, read or write English well;
- **Staff Training:** ensure staff at all levels are sensitive to client diversity and its

implications for policy formulation and program design and delivery;

- **Consultation:** consult with client groups, their advocates and intermediaries on program design, delivery and the effectiveness of A&E measures;
- **Participation:** ensure equitable participation of representatives of A&E target groups in government advisory and review bodies and processes;
- **Funded Programs:** address A&E accountabilities in programs funded by the Commonwealth and delivered by State or local Government and community or private organisations; and
- **Coordination:** ensure efficiencies are achieved through interdepartmental cooperation and coordination on A&E matters such as shared consultative mechanisms and information strategies.

These are the third round of A&E Requirements since the introduction of the Strategy in 1985. They replace the second round that resulted from the Government's decision to extend the A&E Strategy as part of the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia in July 1989.