



Migrant Perceptions of Australia – past, present and future – Summary Report

Introduction

Over the past forty years, Australia's migration policy has been largely shaped by the needs of the Australian economy. Current immigration, settlement and citizenship policy is aligned to economic objectives and according to government policy has been designed to build a sustainable future for Australia. The emphasis is on bringing skilled migrants who are more likely to be proficient in English and have tertiary qualifications into Australia to fill gaps in skill shortages.

In the 2014-15 Federal Budget, the government has set Migration planning levels at 190,000 places. This includes 128,550 places for skilled migrants and 60,885 places for family migrants. The Refugee and Humanitarian Program will provide 13,750 places

Migration to Australia is certain to grow in the years ahead. Strong demand for additional labour (both unskilled and skilled), combined with lower fertility, an ageing population and declining numbers of young people entering the labour market means that Australia will have to look overseas for sufficient workers in the future (Castles et al:2013).

It is important for policy makers and service providers and to understand the motivations of migrants both before and after they arrive in Australia in order to plan and ensure that the settlement process and support services are targeted and meet the needs of new arrivals, support successful settlement and contribute to Australia being perceived as a preferred destination for intending migrants.

Background

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of perceptions of Australia – in terms of the past, present and future. This study provides a context in which to understand the way in which migrants to Australia understand the journey they have made to their new country and hopes for a future life.

Migrants and refugees come to Australia with different levels of knowledge. A number have visited Australia prior to migration, some have a cursory knowledge of Australia acquired in their home country while others come with no knowledge (AMES, 2011:13). People emigrate for many reasons and come to Australia under a range of visa types. Some are motivated by socioeconomic reasons and seeking employment, others wish to start a new life and some seek political asylum. Whatever the reasons, most people emigrate in the belief and hope for a better, more successful future than their home country can offer (Wong, 2013).

On arrival in Australia, new migrants seek to secure long-term accommodation, find employment or start a business, pursue education, learn English, enhance their health and wellbeing, understand Australian norms and laws and be connected to their own community and the broader Australian community. It is common for people who move to a new country to experience discomfort, helplessness, frustration, fear, insecurity, uncertainty about how to behave, a sense that your cultural beliefs and values are being challenged and that things are not predictable.

To appreciate the settlement process there is a need to focus on how migrants' past and present experiences intersect. A person's past has a significant impact on the way they forge a future in their adopted country. Drawing on their past experiences, many new migrants actively seek to establish a new life in Australia using a high level of resourcefulness, creative capacity to enable them to navigate any barriers and constraints they face as they reinvent and transform their lives in a new environment (Christou, 2008).

Although settlement is a challenging experience for many, there is an overwhelming willingness by the vast majority of new migrants to Australia to contribute in a positive way to the host country. There is no doubt that Australia has been enriched as a country that embraces many cultures.

Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)

AMES programs are focused on supporting permanent migration. One of the programs offered by AMES is the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

AMEP is the largest component of Australian Government's settlement program. The ability to communicate in English is vital as it is associated with labour market success, accessing education and training opportunities, gaining information about services and finding suitable housing. This program provides English language tuition to new migrants from the humanitarian and family streams and those who are not the primary applicant in the skilled visa stream. The program generally gives clients access to up to 510 hours (in some cases more hours may be provided) of English language tuition, in their first five years of settlement in Australia.

Methods

This report is based on a survey that was administered to 506 students undertaking the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) at AMES. It details respondents' perceptions before and after migration, their future aspirations in Australia and attitudes to sport.

The survey was given to AMEP students located at three AMES sites, Box Hill, Dandenong and Footscray. Generally speaking, most surveys are administered in English which means that new migrants (particularly those who are not proficient in English) miss out on expressing their views and opinions. This survey was administered in English and five community languages - Chinese, Dari, Vietnamese, Persian and Chin Hakka.

The survey was divided into 5 sections.

1. Perceptions of Australia now and before you migrated
2. Your future in Australia
3. Multiculturalism
4. Your background
5. Questions on sport and AFL football team affiliation

The survey consisted of closed questions. To allow respondents to voluntarily provide additional information and thoughts about their perceptions of Australia since they arrived, a mini-focus group was conducted once the paper based survey was

completed. Respondents could voluntarily provide further information on a range of issues that they deemed important. These mini-focus groups were convened by the survey administrator but due to resource limitations were only offered to classes that completed the survey in English

A summary of the survey findings are as follows:

Who was surveyed

- 54% of respondents completed the survey in languages other than English
- Two-thirds of respondents were from low level English classes (CSWE1 and CSWE2)¹.
- More than half the respondents were aged 24 to 44 years
- Two-thirds of respondents came to Australia under the Migrant Visa (including family, spouse, skilled and business).
- The top three countries where respondents came from were China, Afghanistan and Vietnam. This is a reflection of the client population at the AMES Centres where the surveys were conducted.
- Just under half (45.2%) the sample had been in Australia for less than 12 months. A further 41.7% had been in Australia between 1 to 5 years.
- Highest level of education achieved - 48% of respondents had post-school qualifications, 30% had secondary school, and 18% primary school or no formal education.
- Given that the survey was conducted during day time English classes, eight out of ten respondents were not in paid employment.

¹ Certificate in Spoken and Written English. Everyone who enrolls in the AMEP is assessed on their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in English. This determines eligibility and placement into an appropriate class. These skills are assessed using the International Second Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR). The ISLPR ranks English proficiency on a scale between 0 and 5. Zero being no proficiency and five being 'native like proficiency'

Key Findings

Perceptions of Australia before and after arriving in Australia

New migrants come to Australia with a range of life experiences. Some migrants settle into Australian life more quickly than others Hugo (2011:163). One way to help us understand how migrants make sense of the new and old country is to understand where they have come from and how this influences their ability to forge a future in their adopted country. A migrant's past experience in their homeland has a significant impact upon how they settle into their new life in Australia (Ramsden & Ridge, 2012).

Respondents were asked to reflect on their views about Australia before they arrived and then to consider whether that view had changed since living in Australia.

Australia is safe and secure

- Almost 8 out of 10 respondents believe Australia is safe and secure both before and after arrival.

Australian people are welcoming, warm and friendly

- More people believe that Australian people are warm and friendly after arrival with three quarters of respondent agreeing with this statement.

Finding a good job in Australia that pays well is difficult

- There was a high level of uncertainty before arrival about finding a good job in Australia that pays well, with one third (33.4%) of respondents not knowing or being unsure about finding a job. Before arrival, 39.3% agreed that finding a job would be difficult. After living in Australia there was a significant change in perception with 60% of respondents agreeing with the statement "that finding a good job in Australia that pays well is difficult".

My standard of living will be better in Australia

- Two-thirds of respondents felt that their standard of living would be better in Australia.

My family will have a better life

- Seventy per cent of respondents stated that my family will have a better life in Australia.

Australia is a democratic country that allows freedom of speech

- Three quarters of respondents agreed that Australia is a democratic country before they arrived, this figure increased to 83.8% after they arrived in Australia.

Australia has a good health care system

- Seventy three per cent of respondents agreed that Australia has a good health care system after their arrival in Australia.

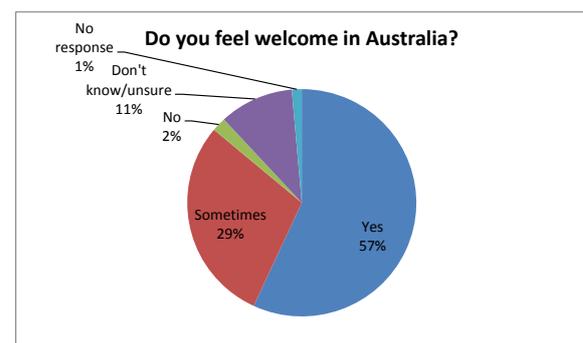
People treat each other equally and fairly

- Almost two thirds (65.2%) agreed that people treat each other equally and fairly before arrival. This figure increased to 69.4% who agreed after arrival.

Decision to come to Australia

- Eight out of 10 respondents felt that their decision to come to Australia was the right one. Sixty three per cent said that they would encourage other people from their country to come to Australia.

Feeling welcome in Australia



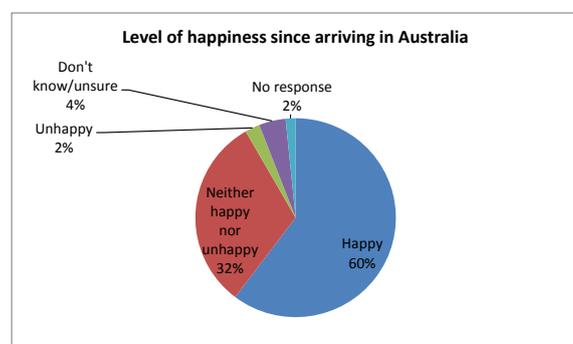
- Over half (56.9%) of respondents felt welcome in Australia, while 29.2% stated that they sometimes feel welcome.

Level of happiness

Happiness and wellbeing among migrant populations is a complex issue that is influenced by a range of inter-related variables such as health,

employment status, job satisfaction, financial success, social support, adaptation to Australian culture and society (Kim, et al 2012). Other issues that impact upon levels of happiness and wellbeing include loss of pre-migration socio-economic status, where well educated and middle class people may transition into lower paid and lower status jobs in Australia. For refugees or those migrants who have left tumultuous homelands, safety and the opportunity to provide a better future for their children is linked to enhanced wellbeing.

There is evidence to suggest that many new migrants tend to feel unsettled when they first arrive, but after a period of time many adapted to their new lives and were more likely to be content (Healey, 2006).



- The survey results indicate that six out of ten respondents felt happy since arriving in Australia. Almost one-third (31.4%) felt neither happy nor unhappy.

Citizenship aspirations

Most migrants who come to Australia generally transition from permanent residence and become citizens (Castles et al, 2013). A survey commissioned by DIAC that was sent to 20,000 migrants who had arrived in Australia on a range of visas asked respondents whether they intended to become Australian citizens. The results indicated that nearly all respondents intended to become citizens. Very few did not intend to become citizens.

- Almost 7 out of 10 (68.2%) respondents stated that they were hoping to become an Australian citizen, 16.2% said they might become an Australian citizen.

Future aspirations

Migrants who come to Australia usually aspire to gain employment that uses their skills and

knowledge, to feel safe and secure, have the opportunity to live with relatives or friends, and imagine a better future. Like most other Australians, migrants want a sense of belonging, to feel valued, connected and to contribute in a meaningful way to their own and the broader community. One of the consistent findings from surveys of migrants on all visa types is that their motivation for coming to Australia is for the increased wellbeing and improved prospects for their children.

- Just under half (49%) of respondent thought their life in Australia would be “much improved”, 31.4% said that it would be “a little improved” in the next three to four years.
- Three quarters of respondents felt that compared with their life, the lives of children living in Australia would be “much improved”, 14.2% felt it would be a “little improved”.

Views on multiculturalism

- Almost two-thirds of respondents felt that multiculturalism has been good for Australia. While one in three (30.6%) were unsure.

One focus group respondent was positive about the way in which Australian society embrace multiculturalism:

“Before I came to Australia I thought Australia was a very westernised modern country. After I arrived I saw many migrants. That wasn't what I expected – multicultural. I thought when you come here you might change yourself [to fit] into the country. The government is giving freedom to people to keep their tradition and culture.”

Sport

Australians like to see themselves as a sporting nation and the idea that Australian's excel in sport is an important part of the national identity. Sport has been assigned a pivotal role in our identity and sense of nationalism. There is a widely held perception that sport promotes egalitarianism and can work across class and gender divides. Sport is also an agency for bonding Australian society,

people and culture (Taylor & Toohey, 2011). There is an increasing body of evidence that sport can play a key role in increasing economic and social cohesion among ethnic communities either through participating in sport or as volunteers in sporting organisation (Hugo, 2011: 238).

- The top 3 favourite sports identified by respondents were tennis, soccer and basketball.
- Just over a quarter (26.3%) of respondents follow teams in the AFL.
- The top three AFL teams were Melbourne, Collingwood and Hawthorn.

Conclusions

The findings from this study indicate that new migrants are not passive bystanders but actively use their agency to forge a new life demonstrating a high level of ingenuity and resilience to create a new life in their adopted country. The results of the *Perceptions of Australia Survey* offer insights into how new migrants perceive Australia before arrival and after settlement. The survey also details whether the decision to come to Australia was the right one and their future aspirations.

Generally speaking, most of those surveyed were positive about being in Australia and hoped for a better future for themselves and their children. Almost two out of three respondents surveyed had been in the country for less than two years. This is significant, particularly when looking at the level of happiness of respondents, where six out of ten felt happy since being in Australia, while almost one-third felt neither happy nor unhappy. It takes some time to adapt and transition into a new way of life. This includes the challenges of learning English, securing accommodation and income and finding a permanent job that pays reasonably well.

There was a high level of optimism demonstrated in the survey, with most people affirming that their decision to come to Australia was the right one and that the majority of respondents felt that their life in Australia would either be much improved or a little improved. Similar sentiments were held about the lives of children living in Australia where the majority felt that life in Australia could offer more opportunities when compared with their life as a child.

The sport question provided an interesting insight into the likes and dislikes of new migrants in relation to sport. Given that AFL is largely a Melbourne centric game it is hardly surprising that those surveyed had not spent time garnering their favourite team.

Finally, the findings from this survey have provided important first-hand evidence that can be used by policy makers and service providers to assist them to understand how migrants feel in their host country. It is particularly important to acknowledge that new migrants aspire to become full social, economic and cultural participants in Australia.

Limitations

This study does not make any claims to be representative of all new migrants. The study sample was purposive rather than representative of new migrants. It provides a snapshot of views that reflect a specific time and place. However, it does provide a voice for migrants' views to be heard that are often overlooked in the mainstream media and by surveys that are conducted only in English. The survey consisted of closed questions to make it simpler for participants to complete. This was due to resource limitations to translate qualitative answers in languages other than English.

The qualitative data collected from the focus groups were not collected as a verbatim transcript from each respondent, but rather a summary of the issues and sentiments identified by the focus group participant.

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