

JUNE 2024 WINTER ISSUE



Ethnic Communities Council
of Western Australia Inc

EQUITY NEWSLETTER

Part 1. All is Well

Part 2. Pathways to
Equity

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Part 1.

**ALL IS WELL: Advancing
Learning and Living:
International Students
Wellbeing Enhancement
for Learning and Living**

International Students Wellbeing

International students significantly contribute to Australia's cultural and academic landscape but face unique mental health challenges exacerbated by cultural stigma and lack of awareness about available support services.

This special issue of ECCWA's Equity Newsletter, focusses on the mental health and wellbeing of international university students studying in Western Australia. The contents of this newsletter are based on the final report of ECCWA's "ALL IS WELL?: Advancing Learning and Living" project. The aim of the project was to assess the accessibility and awareness of mental health services among international students in Western Australia. Our survey revealed significant gaps in awareness and accessibility, with many students deterred by cultural stigmas and practical barriers. This study underscores the urgent need for culturally sensitive mental health services and better communication about these resources.

The project's findings highlight the need for universities and policymakers to prioritise mental health support for international students. Addressing the barriers identified in the survey can improve academic performance, enhance personal well-being, and foster a more inclusive educational environment. ECCWA is committed to advocating for these changes and working with stakeholders to implement the recommendations from this study, ensuring that international students receive the support they need to thrive in Australia.

Background

International students are a vital part of the Australian education system, contributing significantly to the country's cultural and economic landscape.

In the 2018-19 academic year, international education was Australia's third-largest export, generating AUD\$37.6 billion. Despite their contributions, international students often face significant mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and stress, exacerbated by cultural adjustments, academic pressures, and isolation from family and friends. Research indicates that international students underutilise mental health services due to cultural stigma, lack of awareness, and difficulties navigating the healthcare system.

The purpose of ECCWA's "ALL IS WELL?" project is to understand the barriers and challenges faced by these students, with the hope of advocating for improvements in mental health support that are culturally sensitive and accessible.

ECCWA conducted an online survey and an online consultation for international university students in WA. Through the survey, we received 86 responses, and had eight participants join us for the online consultation. The consultation participants originated from Pakistan, Canada, Malaysia, Singapore and Mauritius.



All is Well: Consultation and Survey

The online survey comprised 14 multiple-choice questions and 3 open-ended questions, focusing on:

- Demographics (gender, home country, length of stay, English proficiency)
- Self-rated mental health
- Access and use of mental health services
- Barriers to accessing services
- Adequacy of mental health coverage in student health insurance
- Types of mental health support required
- Recommendations for services

The majority of students participating in the survey were identified to be from South and Southeast Asian countries, with Singapore and India being the top two nationalities (Figure 1). More than half of these students (59%) had lived in Australia for less than one year. Furthermore, the majority of these students rated themselves as having high to very high English proficiency levels and also tended to rate their overall mental health as fairly high since arriving in Western Australia.

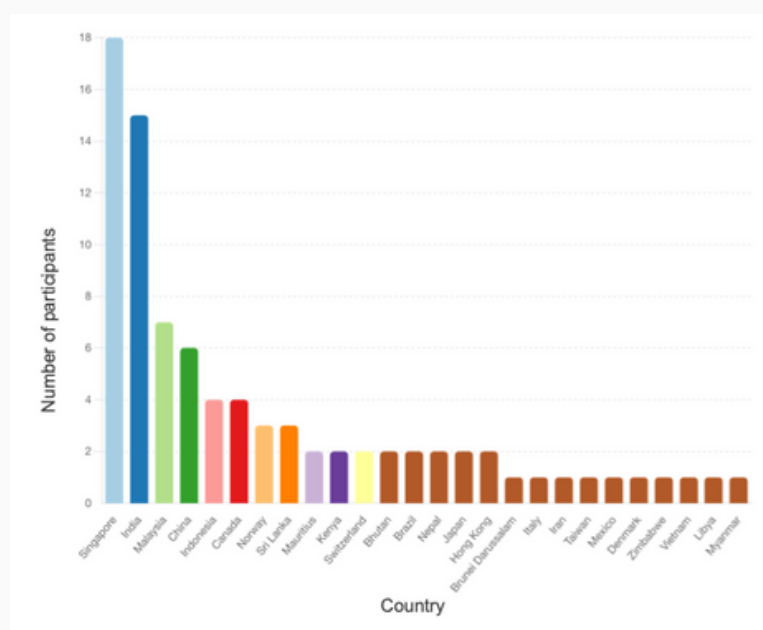


Figure 1. Number of international students from each country that participated in the online survey

Access to Mental Health Services

Out of the 86 international students who participated in the survey, only 19 of them had accessed mental health services in Western Australia (Figure 2). The majority of these students who had accessed mental health support in WA utilized the services provided by their own educational institutions (Figure 3). The students evaluated the mental health-related services they had accessed as mostly high, with 73% of students rating the services above 5 out of 10. Moreover, only 15% of the international students had experienced barriers when accessing mental health support in WA, which reflects the percentage of students that had accessed mental health-related services since arriving in WA.

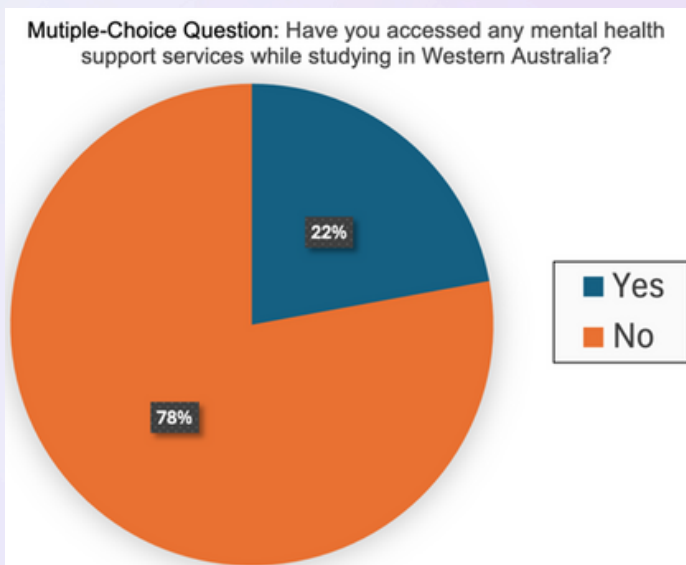


Figure 2. Amount of survey participants who have or have not accessed any sort of mental health support services while studying in Western Australia.

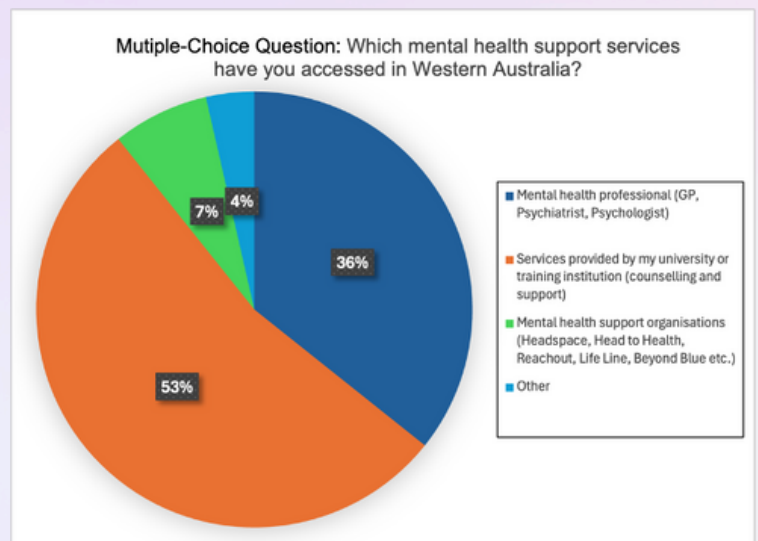


Figure 3. Amount of survey participants who have accessed Mental Health Professionals (GP, Psychiatrist, Psychologist), Services provided by their own university or training institution (counseling and support), Mental Health Support Organizations (Headspace, Life Line, Beyond Blue, etc.), or other during their stay in Western Australia.

Barriers to Accessing to Mental Health Services

In terms of the preventative factors in accessing the services, lack of time, lack of knowledge about available services, and lack of assurance that the services could provide for their specific needs were identified as the three largest constraints out of the eight listed (Figure 4).

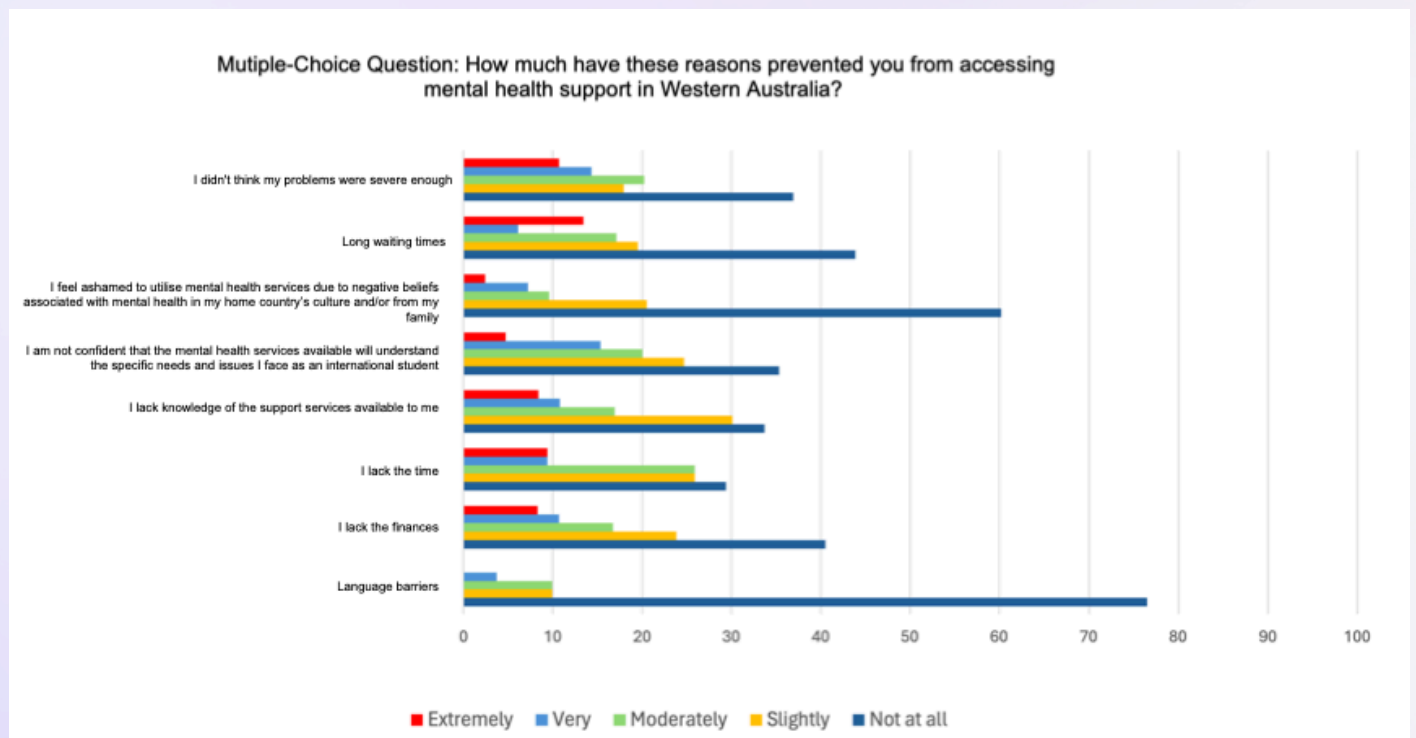


Figure 4. Degree of eight constraining factors that have prevented the survey participants from accessing mental health support in Western Australia (chosen either Extremely, Very, Moderately, Slightly, or Not at all)

Responses from Open-Ended Questions

Question 1: "What type of mental health support would be most helpful to you?"

This question elicited 63 replies.

The most common topic, cited by more than 25% of respondents, was the desire for counseling, therapy, or someone to talk to. Specific demands include:

- Individual counseling/therapy sessions, either in person or online.
- Group therapy or support groups
- Peer Counseling Opportunities

Many respondents (16%) mentioned access concerns as a hindrance, calling for increased availability, shorter wait times, and broader service coverage.

"Availability, less waiting time"

"Current services are good but the long wait times is the issue"

Approximately 10% of responders indicated a need for particular assistance in managing stress, and anxiety, and establishing coping strategies.

Some respondents (8%) expressed a need for additional social activities, events, and opportunities to connect with people as a form of mental health assistance.

Other requirements cited by fewer respondents were financial support, career aid, skill-building programs, and general "inspiration and encouragement." The findings primarily indicate that respondents have a major need for better access to counseling and therapy services, as well as additional assistance such as stress management training and social activities.

Question 2: "What types of mental health support services or programs do you feel would be most beneficial to international students?"

This question elicited 59 replies.

The most common topic, cited in more than 30% of replies, was a need for counseling, treatment, or the opportunity to speak with someone who speak the same language or have similar cultural origins.

"Providing counseling services tailored to the cultural backgrounds and experiences of international students"

Approximately 20% of respondents expressed a need for additional social activities, events, and opportunities to connect with people and form communities.

Many replies (15%) emphasized the importance of culturally relevant mental health care tailored to the specific experiences of overseas students.

"A program in which the students are paired up with a psychologist/psychiatrist who came from the same country"

"Services which connect them to students coming from the same country"

Some respondents (10%) suggested improving access through extended service periods, on-campus availability, and improved advertising of current services. Other requirements noted in the responses were financial help, academic support, language aid, and general adjustment/acclimation support.

Responses from Open-Ended Questions

Question 3: "Can you share any experiences where you sought mental health support in Western Australia? What was the outcome?"

A total of 48 responses were received to the open-ended question "Can you share any experiences where you sought mental health support in Western Australia? What was the outcome?".

Approximately 60% of respondents stated that they had not sought any mental health support services in Western Australia, either replying "N/A", "No", or leaving the response blank. The remaining 40% of responders reported their good and bad experiences seeking mental health care as overseas students in Western Australia.

Positive experiences

"I was able to personally avoid waiting times by going to a private therapist/counsellor...with external/private engagement I found my mental health support to be great."

"It was with no doubt a brilliant experience. I don't know what I would have done to myself had it not been for the counselling service that I received."

"I got assistance from a UWA counsellor. The services were extremely helpful to alleviate financial pressure at the time."

Negative experiences

"In my first year I sought support. It was great honestly. But now trying to get a hold of a professional takes way too much time and effort"

"I went to UWA counselling...but the waiting time was too long, I had to wait two to three weeks for my first session and one whole month for the next."

"3 month wait time"

"Sought out a peer support on campus...but I felt like it was trying to solve my problems when all I wanted was a listening ear"

"I haven't, I sought help to sort out some troubles I had with the administration with UWA though, only to get sent between multiple people, receiving no help from anybody."

A few replies cited other challenges that overseas students confront that may have an influence on their mental health, such as loneliness, sadness, financial stress, and administrative obligations. Overall, the findings show a range of experiences, with some students receiving effective mental health treatment when it was available, while many others encountered major hurdles to care, such as extended wait times and unhelpful services. This underscores the need for improvement in mental health services for overseas students in Western Australia.

What needs to be addressed

There were several key findings from the consultation and survey, with the need for:

Culturally Relevant Care

- Significant need for better access to counselling, therapy, and mental health support for international students.
- Over 25-30% of responses focused on counselling/therapy services
- Importance of culturally appropriate treatments, individual and group therapy, and peer support.

Social Support

- Need for more social events, community-building initiatives, and quicker access to support services.
- Social bonds and a sense of belonging are crucial for mental health; friends are the primary support source.
- Emphasis on culturally appropriate mental health care and initiatives promoting social and cultural integration.

Access & Awareness Barriers

- Long wait times, lack of awareness about available programs, and access hurdles limit support service use.
- Insufficient understanding of on-campus mental health options and delays in accessing culturally competent practitioners.
- Mixed experiences with therapy; some found it effective, while others ineffective.

Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC)

Issues with overseas student health cover in mental health-related services are outlined below. OSHC often has waiting periods of two to twelve months for psychiatric services, delaying immediate mental health support for new students. While psychiatric services are usually covered, counselling and therapy sessions are underinsured, creating financial barriers for students. The complexity of insurance claims and navigating unfamiliar healthcare systems, along with the transient nature of student visas, further discourages students from seeking and continuing mental health treatment.

OSHC Provider	Mental Health Coverage	Counselling/Therapy Services	Additional Support Services
AHM OSHC	Psychiatric Services (2-month waiting period)	Stress and Trauma Counselling Services: Access to qualified counsellors for initial discussions over the phone, with potential in-person follow-up	24/7 Student Health and Support Line: Medical assistance from a registered nurse, emergency legal advice, health system navigation, interpreter service, family and friends message service
Allianz Care Australia (Peoplecare)	Psychiatric Services (2-month waiting period for pre-existing conditions of a psychiatric nature)	24-hour helpline for medical advice and assistance, telephone access to a solicitor for legal advice, and access to an interpreting service	Assistance with replacing travel documents or passports, emergency message service
Bupa Australia	Outpatient Psychiatric Services, Hospital Psychiatric Services	Not specifically mentioned in the document	Student Advice Line: Medical, home and property inquiries, general tax and legal enquiries, available in 150 languages
CBHS International Health	Psychiatric Services (specified waiting period for pre-existing conditions)	Not specifically mentioned in the document	24/7 Health Advice Line: Medical support and other health-related advice
Medibank Private	Psychiatric Treatment (12-month waiting period for pre-existing conditions and pregnancy-related services)	Not specifically mentioned in the document	24/7 Health Advice Line: Access to health-related support and services

Reform

ECCWA offers three proposals for reform.

01 **Improve Coordination and Referral Pathways**

International students often struggle with a lack of awareness about available mental health facilities, which significantly hinders their ability to get the treatment they need. Enhancing connections and referral networks between campus services, academic departments, and community providers, along with implementing case coordination support, could improve the continuity and effectiveness of mental health care for these students.

02 **Improve Accessibility and Awareness**

International students often struggle to seek treatment due to limited mental health literacy and understanding of available options. To address this, proactive awareness initiatives and centralised information resources detailing campus and community services, along with educational materials on recognising mental health concerns, could be highly beneficial.

03 **Improve Cultural Competency**

Enhancing the cultural competency of mental health services and creating tailored programs for international students can improve their mental health awareness and literacy. An educational short online course, with tailored approaches including information on available support services and recognising signs of mental illnesses, could help address the lack of knowledge and stigma around seeking support.

Part 2.

Pathways to Equity: Government Initiatives and Community Support for CaLD Workforce Integration

Pathways to equity

Addressing barriers to employment for culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) individuals is crucial for reducing economic inequality in Western Australia. Employment leads to income stability and upward mobility, which can mitigate income and wealth disparities. This section explores these challenges and highlights government initiatives aimed at improving workforce participation and career development for CaLD communities to enhance their workforce participation, contributing to economic equality. Understanding state government policies, priorities, and goals is essential for effective advocacy and support

Barriers to Employment for CaLD Individuals

01 Language Barriers

Limited English skills impede job searches, interviews, and workplace communication, reducing employment opportunities. Language proficiency is crucial for effective job performance and professional growth. The state government prioritises language training through programs such as the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program, which offers language, literacy, and numeracy training. This initiative is essential to help CaLD individuals integrate into the workforce, thereby reducing income inequality. Furthermore, community-based language classes provided by local councils and NGOs supplement these efforts, ensuring wider access and more tailored learning experiences.

02 Recognition of Overseas Qualifications

Many CaLD individuals possess qualifications and experience from their home countries that are not recognised in Australia, forcing them into lower-skilled jobs and underutilising their abilities. The Australian government has processes for recognising overseas qualifications through the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR). However, streamlining these processes and increasing awareness among employers about the value of international qualifications are necessary steps. The state government supports bridging programs that allow migrants to meet local certification standards, facilitating their entry into skilled employment and promoting economic mobility.

Barriers to Employment for CaLD Individuals

03 **Discrimination Bias**

Discrimination in hiring practices and workplace bias significantly hinder employment opportunities for CaLD individuals. Stereotypes and prejudices can affect employer decisions, limiting access to job interviews and career advancement. The state government's anti-discrimination policies and workplace diversity initiatives, such as those promoted by the Equal Opportunity Commission, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), and Diversity Council Australia (DCA), are crucial in combating these issues. Training programs aimed at cultural competence for HR personnel and managers help foster inclusive workplaces, thereby ensuring fairer employment opportunities for CaLD individuals.

04 **Lack of Local Experience**

Employers often prioritise local experience, which many CaLD individuals lack. This preference creates a barrier for new migrants and refugees trying to enter the job market. To address this, the state government, in collaboration with community organisations, provides work experience programs, internships, and volunteer opportunities tailored for CaLD individuals. These programs help migrants gain local work experience, understand Australian workplace culture, and build professional networks, thereby enhancing their employability and career prospects. The Jobs and Skills WA initiative offers tailored support and resources to help CaLD individuals gain relevant skills and experience to improve their job prospects.

Government Initiatives to Improve Workforce Participation

JobActive Program

- Provides tailored job search support, training, and work experience opportunities for CaLD individuals.
- Helps reduce income disparities by connecting job seekers with employers and developing necessary skills.
- State government ensures accessibility through specific outreach efforts and support structures for CaLD communities.

Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Program

- Offers language, literacy, and numeracy training to improve English skills and workforce readiness for CaLD individuals.
- Crucial for overcoming language barriers and enhancing employability.
- State government funding ensures broad reach, particularly for those needing foundational skills.

National Recognition of Qualifications

- Processes in place for the recognition of overseas qualifications, assisted by NOOSR.
- Helps CaLD individuals pursue jobs matching their skills and experience.
- State government supports these efforts with information sessions and advisory services.

Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives

- Promoted by government and non-government organisations like Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) and Diversity Council Australia (DCA).
- Provide resources and support to employers to create inclusive workplaces valuing cultural diversity.
- State government policies and funding demonstrate commitment to fostering equitable work environments for CaLD individuals.

Community and Non-Government Initiatives



Migrant Resource Centres

- These centres offer job readiness programs, resume writing workshops, and job placement services tailored to the needs of migrants and refugees, directly addressing employment barriers.
- The state government supports these centres through grants and partnerships, ensuring they have the resources needed to effectively serve CaLD communities.

Mentoring Programs

- Mentoring programs connect CaLD individuals with industry professionals who provide guidance, support, and networking opportunities, facilitating smoother transitions into the workforce.
- State government support for these programs includes funding and the development of frameworks that encourage professional associations to participate, enhancing the reach and impact of mentoring initiatives.

Advocacy Support Groups

- Organisations such as the Ethnic Communities Council of Western Australia (ECCWA) advocate for the rights and needs of CaLD individuals, influencing policy, raising awareness, and providing support to overcome employment barriers.
- The state government collaborates with these groups to ensure that policies and programs are informed by the experiences and needs of CaLD communities, leading to more effective and targeted interventions.

Recommendations for Improving Workforce Participation

Enhancing Language Training Programs

Expanding access to language training programs like SEE can help more CaLD individuals improve their English skills, making them more competitive in the job market. The state government should increase funding and support for these programs, ensuring they are accessible to all CaLD individuals, particularly in regional and remote areas.

Streamlining Qualification Recognition

Simplifying the process for recognising overseas qualifications can enable more CaLD individuals to work in their trained professions, reducing underemployment and enhancing economic contributions. The state government should work with federal bodies to streamline these processes and provide clear, accessible information to CaLD communities about how to have their qualifications recognised.

Promoting Inclusive Hiring Practices

Encouraging employers to adopt inclusive hiring practices can help reduce discrimination and bias, ensuring fair employment opportunities. The state government should promote and incentivise inclusive hiring practices through grants, awards, and public recognition programs that highlight employers who demonstrate commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Increasing Access to Local Experience

Creating more opportunities for CaLD individuals to gain local experience through internships, volunteer positions, and apprenticeships can help them build relevant work history and improve employability. The state government should collaborate with businesses and community organisations to expand these programs and ensure they are accessible to all CaLD individuals.

Harnessing the full potential of the CaLD community

Improving employment and workforce participation for CaLD individuals in Western Australia requires a comprehensive approach that addresses language barriers, recognition of qualifications, discrimination, and the need for local experience. Government and community initiatives play a vital role in supporting these efforts. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, we can create a more inclusive and equitable workforce that harnesses the full potential of CaLD individuals.

*The Ethnic Communities Council of Western Australia (ECCWA) has developed a comprehensive **RESPECT Framework** to enhance employment opportunities for CaLD communities. This framework focuses on representation, engagement, sensitivity, policy inclusion, evaluation, communication, and training. It aims to foster a more inclusive and equitable workforce across community organisations, businesses, and government agencies. To learn more about how this framework can benefit your community, please get in touch with us for detailed information.*

R.E.S.P.E.C.T

Representation

Ensuring diverse community representation in decision-making roles.



Engagement

Active engagement and consultation with culturally and linguistically diverse communities.



Sensitivity

Sensitivity to cultural and linguistic needs in services and communications.



Policy Inclusion

Inclusion of specific needs and provisions for diverse communities in policies.



Evaluation

Ongoing evaluation of policies and practices to ensure effectiveness for diverse groups.



Communication

Clear and accessible communication in multiple languages.



Training

Training of individuals to effectively understand and implement RESPECT.



Programs and Resources Supporting CaLD Employment and Inclusive Hiring Practices

01 **Job Active Program**

Provides job search support, training, and work experience opportunities tailored to CaLD individuals.

02 **Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Program**

Offers language, literacy, and numeracy training to enhance employability.

03 **National Recognition of Qualifications**

Helps CaLD individuals have their overseas qualifications assessed and recognised.

04 **Equal Opportunity Commission WA**

Promotes workplace diversity and inclusion, combating discrimination. Provides training programs and resources to help employers understand and implement inclusive hiring practices.

05 **Jobs and Skills WA**

Provides resources and support for skills development and employment pathways for CaLD individuals, including best practices for recruitment and retention

06 **Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WEGA)**

Provides guidelines and resources for creating inclusive workplaces.

07 **Diversity Council Australia (DCA)**

Offers comprehensive resources and training materials on diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

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GOVERNMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA



OFFICE OF
MULTICULTURAL INTERESTS