National Policy Forum
Multiculturalism in the New Millennium
29-30 March 2001

Relationship Matters:
Implementing the *Multicultural Queensland Policy* in Public Sector Agencies

Patrick O'Brien
Principal Policy Advisor (Ethnic Health)
Health Outcomes Unit
Queensland Health

This paper explores the influence of the *Multicultural Queensland Policy* on the operation and performance of the public sector. Key features of the policy and the environment into which it was introduced are described. The paper outlines the role of Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ) in the implementation process, its relationship with public sector organisations and agency reactions to the policy and the actions of MAQ. Finally, it discusses hazards and challenges facing the system and considers its future prospects.[1]

The Queensland system for implementing the policy does not rely on statutory regulations or an enforcement regime for policy compliance. It consists of a policy framework and administrative arrangements overseen by Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ) as set out in the *Multicultural Queensland Policy* document. This does not reveal the full picture however. It is only by reviewing how the system has operated in practice that it is possible to fully and accurately describe its features, and understand how it works and what makes it work well.

The system pivots on the relationship between MAQ and public sector agencies within which authority is exercised and engagement with the policy is negotiated. This relationship requires careful management by MAQ, particularly in balancing the use of authority on the one hand and collaborative approaches with agencies on the other in its effort to facilitate the adoption of the policy.

The success of the implementation arrangements is dependent on the commitment and authority of the political and bureaucratic leadership and the active engagement by public sector agencies. There are good reasons to

---

[1] I have spoken to representatives from Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ) and of various Departments in the Queensland Public Service to research this paper. I have not sought to evaluate MAQ's performance or the performance of individual public sector agencies.

think that the advances made in the introduction of multicultural approaches in the public sector will continue for the foreseeable future. However, it is important to recognise that the factors supporting the success of the current arrangements are impermanent and any adverse changes to the policy environment could put these advances at risk.

The Multicultural Queensland Policy

Two decades of policy convergence around multiculturalism across Australian governments have influenced the thinking of political decision-makers and bureaucratic policy advisers in Queensland. Multicultural policy ideas obtained a foothold in the early 1990s with the first policy developed in 1993 and, following a change of government, a second in 1996. The current policy endorsed in August 1998 is cast in the same mould as other multicultural policies around Australia.

The *Multicultural Queensland Policy* is a 'top down' policy formulated by specialist multicultural policy advisers at the behest of government. The policy lists principles drawn from the *Charter of Public Service in A Culturally Diverse Society* and obliges public sector agencies to 'operationalise these principles in their planning and service delivery'. It is neither specific about the actions required by agencies[2] nor about how their performance would be measured. These features smoothed the way for its uncontested endorsement and widespread acceptance.

The target of the policy, the Queensland public sector, consists of 46 Ministerial Departments and agencies and 9 non-Ministerial agencies with a total of 175,000 staff. The responsibility for implementing the policy rests with individual public sector agencies and ultimately with a host of managers and staff in each agency. The policy requires agencies to respond to and manage diversity by modifying their conceptual approach to policy making, planning and service delivery.

Prior to the 1998 policy the penetration of multicultural policy ideas was superficial in many agencies and its impact on programs and services was limited. At the outset of this process the problems facing sector-wide implementation were a lack of recognition of the need for and a lack of experience with multicultural approaches to planning or service delivery. The goal of achieving consistent adoption of the policy across the public sector or even the systematic implementation within a single agency was and remains a significant challenge.

Queensland did not introduce statutory regulations to reinforce the policy directive. There were no compliance standards, enforcement procedures or enforcement agents established. The *Multicultural Queensland Policy* only

---

[2] The exceptions are with interpreter use and consultation.

directs agencies to publish an annual progress report[3] and MAQ provides a consolidated report to the Premier. The government adopted a 'light touch' rather than the 'heavy hand'.[4]

In place of a regulatory regime the government introduced measures to guide or support agency implementation. The Premier created a Parliamentary Secretary to assist him on Multicultural Affairs. A Community Advisory Committee was established to inform the Parliamentary Secretary and hence the Government about community need and to provide feedback on government agency performance. An Interdepartmental Committee (IDC) was established to *ensure consistency in (the) implementation of the principles and strategies of the .. policy across government'*. Its principal measure was to assign MAQ with the roles *of 'advising and assisting government agencies'* and *'coordinating whole-of-government policy development and planning'*.

The course of implementation

MAQ's task was to take a policy they initiated and engineer its transfer into other government agencies. Once it left MAQs hands and received Cabinet endorsement it moved out of their direct control, but not completely from their sphere of influence. Agencies, having had little to do with its formulation, now had responsibility for its outcomes. In a situation where the policy was developed outside of agencies and is being driven from above it is unrealistic to expect that there would be an automatic and consistent adoption of the policy across the public sector.

Some agencies did have existing multicultural policies and programs that were consistent with the new policy approach including cross-cultural training programs, multilingual information strategies and cross-cultural liaison officers. The introduction of the policy served to reinforce the position of these initiatives within these agencies. In some instances the policy encouraged these agencies to adopt a more systematic framework to their work.

A number of agencies actively engaged with the policy and commenced to review and plan in accordance with the new policy principles. Action commenced on developing portfolio multicultural policies and language service plans and enhancing training and recruitment plans. Other agencies were initially slower to action either failing to see the relevance to their work, concerned with budgetary constraints or troubled by competing priorities.

---

[3] The report is published as part of each agency's Annual Report.

[4] This approach was probably the result of the adoption of new public sector management thinking that promoted the reduction of centralised controls and 'letting managers manage'. While there had been an increase in the coordination of policy making by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet throughout the '90s there was concern that the early style of central agency coordination was 'heavy-handed'.

Even in these organisations there are recent reports of a culture shift towards a receptiveness to multicultural approaches.

Overall there has been greater attention to multicultural issues in all portfolios and early indications of a more systematic approach to portfolio planning. These developments have resulted from independent agency initiative and the effects of actions by MAQ. The following sections discuss the role that MAQ has played and the factors within agencies that have produced these positive changes.

The role of Multicultural Affairs Queensland

MAQ has twenty staff, ten of whom are involved in public sector work to some extent.[5] While these are limited resources for an imposing task, MAQ was well positioned to exercise influence. MAQ's actions rest on the authority conferred by the Cabinet decision to endorse the policy and establish reporting arrangements. This established MAQs legitimacy with agencies in this policy field. This was further reinforced by the Government's actions in:

• confirming its position within the Department of Premier and Cabinet
• having the Director-General of Premier and Cabinet chair the Interdepartmental Committee on Multicultural Affairs
• increasing its budgetary resources thus strengthening its capacity to build ethnic community infrastructure and develop its community relation strategies.[6]

An analysis of their actions since the policy endorsement suggests that MAQ has fashioned a more complex and assertive role than the description in the policy statement implies. The functions it performs are:

1. Leadership
2. Coordination
3. Policy pushing
4. Compliance monitoring
5. Policy learning
6. Collaboration

MAQ provided leadership by identifying issues and priorities and conveying them to agencies. It has taken the lead on developing government positions on emergent issues such as the Queensland Government's statement on

---

[5] There are 6 policy staff and 2 public sector trainers who work with the public sector full time while the Executive Director and Director of Policy are involved as issues arise.

[6] This can at least partly be attributed to a perceived need to counter the effects of anti-multicultural sentiments surrounding the growth of the One Nation movement on the State's reputation, potentially affecting tourism, trade, social stability and the well-being of ethnic communities.

service provision to Temporary Protection Visa holders and on previously unaddressed issues such as the Recognition Statement for Australian South Sea Islanders. It has initiated research on the needs of small communities to draw attention to their needs.

MAQ coordinated the whole-of-government Australian South Sea Islander Action Plan and the negotiation of a memorandum of understanding with the Translating and Interpreting Service. Issues are taken to the Interdepartmental Committee on Multicultural Affairs (IDC) and then dealt with through working parties chaired and resourced by MAQ.

MAQ has been involved in a continuous process of 'policy pushing' ie prompting, advocating, and urging agencies to adopt a multicultural policy approach or to address specific issues. This persistent and often subtle pressure is evident in IDC meetings, in addresses to agency executive meetings and in individual contacts with Department representatives. Sometimes this 'pressuring' is formal and authoritative such as in correspondence from the Premier to Ministers or from the Director-General of Premier and Cabinet to agency Directors-General. This is sometimes followed-up by meetings of the Executive Director of MAQ with senior Departmental representatives. Indirectly MAQ maintain pressure on agency performance by funding advocacy positions in community based organisations.

MAQ has monitored compliance with the policy by reviewing annual reports by agencies and providing a consolidated report to the Premier. They consult with communities around the state and obtain information about community perceptions for inclusion in the report. Sometimes this information feeds the 'policy pushing' function.

MAQ has created an environment for policy learning where multicultural approaches are studied for their applicability to various portfolios. Sometimes this occurs in direct discussion with agencies and sometimes by organising Departmental presentations in IDC meetings or in working groups. While some agencies study or experiment with approaches used elsewhere on their own initiative others are drawn into doing so by MAQ. This work is supported at the operational level through the work of the Training Unit that develops cultural diversity skills and knowledge within groups of agency staff. This training also explores strategies for addressing cultural diversity with managers and staff. MAQ has also guided agencies thinking by preparing Guidelines for Agency Planning and Reporting and Language Services Guidelines.

MAQ has collaborated with agencies in a number of ways. They are regularly called on to provide advice on strategic or project planning and have provided support to Department's cabinet submissions. MAQ has entered partnerships or bilateral arrangements with Departments. In one instance they developed a pilot program and negotiated its transfer to a line agency for continuation.

MAQ has joint funding programs with two agencies and there have also been instances of collaborative research on service matters.[7]

In the performance of this complex role MAQ has two primary avenues of influence with public sector agencies. It can either mobilise the authority of the Premier and the Director-General of Premier and Cabinet or it can build relationships with agencies or it can do both[8]. These two operating modes produce different reactions in agencies and are not always compatible.

MAQ has used the leverage associated with being part of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. At various times they engage the support of the Premier on issues, are aided by the Director-General of Premier and Cabinet in raising matters at executive forums or in writing to Directors-General. They draw on the assistance of the Social Policy Unit in the Policy Coordination Division of Premier and Cabinet to screen Cabinet papers for their relevance to the Multicultural Queensland Policy and to draw the attention of Departments to multicultural issues when necessary.

MAQ also have worked collaboratively with public sector agencies to secure their sustained commitment to the policy field. They develop and maintain individual relationships with agency representatives and form networks clustering around different issues. They conduct a form of diplomacy that involves acquiring an understanding of each agency's situation, offering advice and support where necessary and negotiating for desired outcomes. These relationships take time to develop and for mutual trust and respect to grow.

Factors promoting effective Departmental responses

The actions of MAQ have stirred interest in the policy and facilitated changes in agencies approach but despite its capacity to influence, MAQ cannot achieve real change in agencies unless agencies themselves engage with the policy. This is dependent on factors internal to each agency.

A review of recent implementation history suggests that the key determinants of effective engagement with the policy were the interest and commitment of the Minister and Director-General and the efforts of the Departmental representative. All Ministers endorsed the policy but some have actively sought improvements. There have been varying levels of active support, monitoring and follow-up of agency performance by Directors-

---

[7] The higher 'control-related' roles (eg policy pushing and compliance) are more evident early in the relationship with agencies and/or when there is a perception of inertia in the response to the policy. The policy learning and higher level collaborative roles emerge as the relationship matures and agencies assume greater responsibility for their own performance. While there is no uniform pattern it is likely that each agency will have experienced MAQ operating in all of these roles over a period of time.

[8] HK Colebatch *"Policy"* Open University Press Buckingham 1998

General. Executive Managers in government have to deal with a crowded agenda and a range of competing priorities and it is very easy for attention to shift quickly onto other issues. MAQ contacts, IDC meetings and written correspondence have served to maintain agencies' attention on multicultural issues. From this year, progress against equity and diversity outcomes are being monitored through Queensland Government CEO performance contracts. This will bring more consistent attention to these issues.

The IDC representative or occasionally an associated policy officer performed the role of interpreting the implications of the policy to the agency and of interpreting the nature of the Departmental business and the scope for change to MAQ. They were the people most affected by MAQs efforts to influence their agency through discussion, negotiation and 'policy pushing'.

The quality of their agency's response was crucially affected by their level of interest, knowledge, skills and the time they had available to promote and 'push' the policy in their own organisation. The strategic position of the IDC representative was particularly important. Where an agency assigned responsibility for coordination to a strategic policy coordination unit (or the like) the agency response was more systematic. In instances where the responsibility was assigned to an operational area it has proved difficult to influence other sections of the department.

Other characteristics of the agency also influenced the extent of policy adoption. The agency's size, purpose and organisational complexity all played a role. Smaller agencies with a committed leadership integrated the policy relatively easily. Agencies without a clear service delivery focus struggled to interpret the implications of the policy for their portfolio. More difficulties were encountered by agencies with devolved management or with multiple policy and service delivery responsibilities.

The general receptiveness of the agency was influenced by its previous interest in cultural diversity issues either in response to community need or to perceived business requirements. Organisations that had experience with other equity programs or were influenced by public sector reform ideas on maintaining a customer/consumer focus were also more receptive.

The changes that have taken place in the public sector since the policy's endorsement are a combination of independent agency action and the promptings of MAQ[9]. Some agencies do not attribute their multicultural initiatives to the actions of MAQ. Others acknowledge that MAQs work and the impact of the reporting requirement have pushed these issues up the priority list or created opportunities for policy officers within the department to make advances on an issue. For some agencies the requirement to publish

---

[9] The changes in this time are recorded in the *Report (s) to the Premier on the Implementation of the Multicultural Queensland Policy* in 1998-99 and 1999-2000.

reports was a catalyst to action. The reports drew deficiencies to the attention of departmental policy advisors and to the need for remedial action. Others suggest the stimulus for change was discussions with MAQ officers about the implications and opportunities of multicultural approaches for their business or portfolio area.

Hazards

In general, the relationship between MAQ and public sector agencies is constructive. However, since this relationship is so pivotal to the implementation system it requires careful nurturing and management. An examination of the way the system operates points to situations where strains in the inter-organisational relationship could occur.

As indicated earlier, agencies experience both pressure and support from MAQ. If the 'pressuring' mode were to dominate this would discourage collaborative responses and active engagement with the policy. Institutional pressure alone tends to produce reactions of acquiescence, partial conformity, symbolic compliance, active resistance or attempts to manipulate or change the expectations rather than active engagement with the policy.[10]

Even the manner in which authority is mobilised could detrimentally affect the quality of the relationship building. An injudicious use of 'pressure' or one perceived by the agency to be unfair or stepping over the boundary into agency's area of responsibility can burn off the good will of agencies. MAQ need to be able to use both approaches to be effective but need to exercise care in how they are employed and how an appropriate balance is maintained between the two.

Tension between MAQ and agencies could also arise from different perceptions of their respective roles and responsibilities. Multiculturalism is the core purpose of MAQ but only one of a series of responsibilities of agencies. Some agencies see themselves as ill-equipped to identify issues and develop strategic responses or identify problems and look to MAQ for leadership and even direct assistance. MAQ feels it has limited resources and looks to Departments to assume responsibility for their own situations and for some to take the lead on certain cross-department issues.

MAQ views commentating and offering advice on Departments' initiatives as part of its proper role. Agencies with a history of independent initiatives may see MAQ as sitting in judgement without having provided assistance. Given the increasing use of partnership initiatives it will be important that agencies

---

[10] Bigelow B *"Why Don't They Do What We Want? An Exploration of Organisational Responses to Institutional Pressures in Community Health Centers"* Public Administration Review 1995 55, 2 pp 183-192

are included at the commencement of planning and that recognition of each party's contribution is made and credit for success is shared.

In each of these scenarios there is a risk that different perceptions can cause misunderstandings and difficulties. The risk of this happening needs to be acknowledged and the relative roles and responsibilities negotiated carefully.

Challenges

The challenge for MAQ and the agencies is to build on the achievements to date. From a sector-wide viewpoint there needs to be a clearer integration of multicultural objectives with whole of government objectives and for work to continue on developing better performance indicators so that achievements can be demonstrated. More thought is needed on the selection of clear government wide and individual agency priorities and there should be more opportunities to learn from each other and from developments elsewhere.

For each agency the primary internal challenge is to drive the implementation process throughout the organisation and ensure that the agency has the requisite knowledge and skills to plan and manage for cultural diversity.

It is important to recognise that even with a positive response from the leadership of the agency, inertia or even resistance can occur at different levels within the organisation. Some managers regard the multicultural policy as an issue of marginal importance or at least not of sufficient priority to warrant action. Others see it as a potential source of overload or are concerned with its impact on the agencies core business or its budgetary position.

Each agency needs a policy driver who can keep attention on the issue and mobilise others to implement the policy across the agency. In some instances agencies have a multicultural unit or policy advisor while in others generalist policy advisors assume this responsibility. The latter arrangement can and does work well and is the only option for smaller agencies. However, there are examples of enthusiastic but overloaded staff who are prevented by other priorities from giving this area the attention it needs.

Prospects for the future

This multicultural policy has had more impact on Queensland government agencies than either of its predecessors. The position of MAQ in a central agency with the active support of the political and bureaucratic leadership has been a major factor in this. The continuing implementation of the policy will depend on this commitment being sustained.

The factors that account for the strength of its current position are also the source of its vulnerability. If the political or bureaucratic leadership changed

or changed its priorities, or if the Unit was shifted to a line agency its capacity to influence government agencies would diminish.

There are a number of additional factors crucial to the long term success of advocacy units like MAQ and its policy agenda including:

• Political stability
• Societal support for the policy issues
• Organisational, budgetary and statutory resources
• Capacity for knowledge and information production
• Organised support of policy beneficiaries who maintain pressure on agencies
• Viable policy community to sustain and contribute to ideas development (ie an informal network of policy advisers, interested academics and community advocates shaping policy thinking about these issues)[11].

The current political environment is stable. The government that initiated this policy has been returned for another term and there has been bipartisan support for multiculturalism for some time. Instability could arise if minority parties unsympathetic to a multicultural policy agenda achieve greater electoral success.

The level of support for multiculturalism across Queensland is variable but there is probably a majority, if not overwhelming, support for the policy approach. Paradoxically the need to distance the government from the views of opponents of multiculturalism has been more influential on government thinking than popular endorsement.

MAQs resources have been enhanced in the recent years and it has demonstrated a capacity to produce new knowledge and information for use by agencies. Whether these resources and its knowledge producing capacity are adequate are open questions.

In Queensland the influence of multicultural pressure/interest groups on the government and the public sector agencies is not strong but there are organisations which show signs of developing into ones that can maintain some pressure on agency performance. [12]

An active and influential 'policy community' around multiculturalism does not exist. A link with the Brisbane Institute is occurring as part of this forum and

---

[11] J Malloy *"Conflicts Between Bureaucratic and Social Movement Criteria"* Governance: An International Journal of Policy and Administration, Vol 12, No 3 July 1999 pp 267-288

[12] Interestingly the other aspects of MAQs work in community relations and improving ethnic community infrastructure may serve to strengthen the position and the place of the *Multicultural Queensland Policy* in the public sector.

the forum itself is a significant step in building a local 'policy community'. These initiatives need to be built on to create opportunities to influence elite decision-makers and disseminate policy ideas.

In summary the factors supporting the continuing influence of MAQ and its policy agenda are stronger than those that could undermine it. The prospects for the continued strengthening of multiculturalism in the public sector in Queensland look promising in the short term but this supportive environment could change over time and place these recent developments at risk.