

2012

**Access and Equity Report:
The Queensland Muslim Community and
Australian Government Services**



Commissioned by:

- Council of Imams Queensland

With the support of:

- Griffith Islamic Research Unit, Griffith University
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Author

Riyad H. Rahimullah

r.rahimullah@griffith.edu.au

Griffith Islamic Research Unit

Griffith University

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Summary

The Australian Government asked the Muslim community to inform them about its members' experience with, and appraisal of, government services. Representative from various Muslim community organisations in Queensland initiated an online survey to measure community attitudes. 36 Muslims from Queensland responded to the survey. They were of varying ages and ethnic backgrounds. The most used services were health services. Not everyone found it easy to access government services; although some did find it easy. A number of experiences were shared outlining the difficulties Muslims faced when accessing Centrelink, health services and employment. The respondents indicated that government services need to adapt to cater for the needs of Muslims. When asked what the government could do to improve access of their services to Muslims respondents suggested overcoming language barriers, being culturally and religiously sensitive, and increasing the community's awareness of available services. In a similar vein, a vast majority of respondents felt specific standards should be adhered to so that it's not harder for the Muslim community to access services. Respondents also suggested ways for how the Government can inform Muslim of its services and how to access them. Based on the findings, recommendations were made for the Australian Government.

About the survey

The survey's items were developed using the areas of interest to the Australian Government. These areas of interest were contained in a document that the Australian Government shared with the Muslim community when they asked for community feedback on these topics. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A of this paper.

Method of data collection

The survey was hosted online in February, 2012. Invitations to participate were shared through Muslim networks via email and flyer distributions at several mosques after Friday (*Jumah*) congregational prayers. The survey was open for 2 weeks only, due to time limitations.

About the respondents

In total, 36 members of the Queensland Muslim community participated in this online survey¹. However 8 did not fully complete the survey. The mean age of respondents was 44 years (Median 42.5 years). The age of respondents ranged from between 23 and 67. There were 25 males and 11 females.

In terms of ethnic background, majority of the participants were either from Southern Africa or the Indian sub-continent. There were also a relatively large number of Arabs. The breakdown of ethnic backgrounds is illustrated in figure 1 below.

¹ There were fewer respondents than was hoped for. This could have been due to several reasons including:

- 1) the short time frame meant news of the survey could not reach the largest possible audience,
- 2) there was a small window of opportunity to participate,
- 3) not all participants may have had access to a computer, and
- 4) the survey was in English only, and not in other languages.

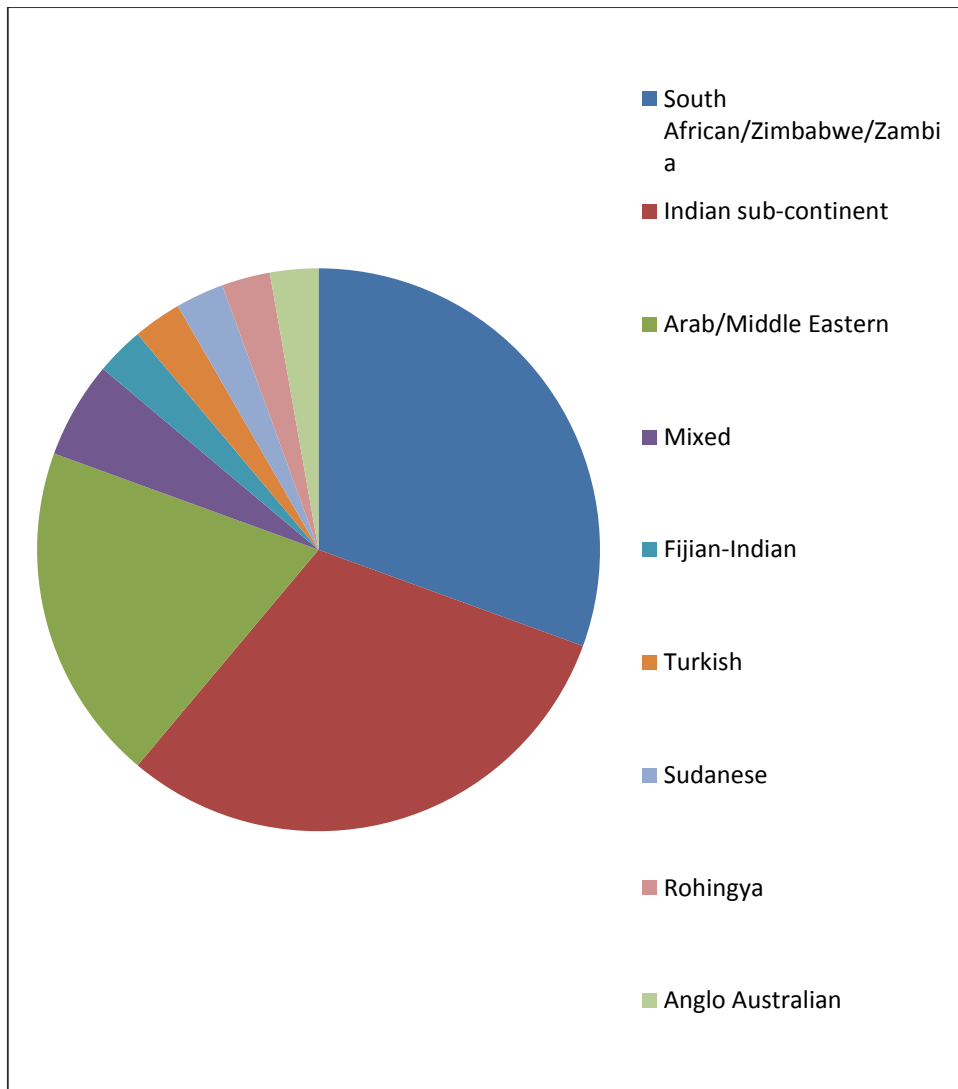


Figure 1: Ethnic background of respondents.

Survey results

Services used most

When asked what services our respondents most used they indicated health services more than others. Participants were able to note more than one response. A further 6 opted to be specific. Two of these responses (Centrelink child benefit, and community housing) were categorised under welfare. The remaining 4 responses could not be categorised. They included: immigration, HECS, dealing with people using welfare, and boilermaker. Figure 2 below depicts which services respondent's reported to use the most.

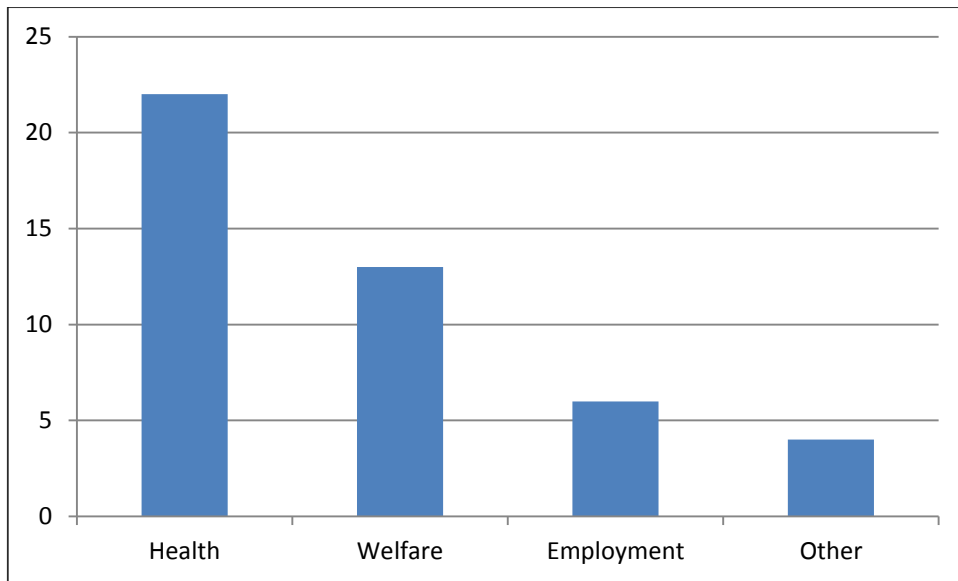


Figure 2: Services most used.

Ease and difficulty in use of Australian Government services

Respondents communicated that they tended to find it easy to use government services. That said, some did find it difficult. Further, some responded neutrally suggesting there is room to improve concerning Muslim use of government services. Figure 3 below illustrates how easy or difficult our respondents felt it was to use government services. 12 people skipped the question on this topic.

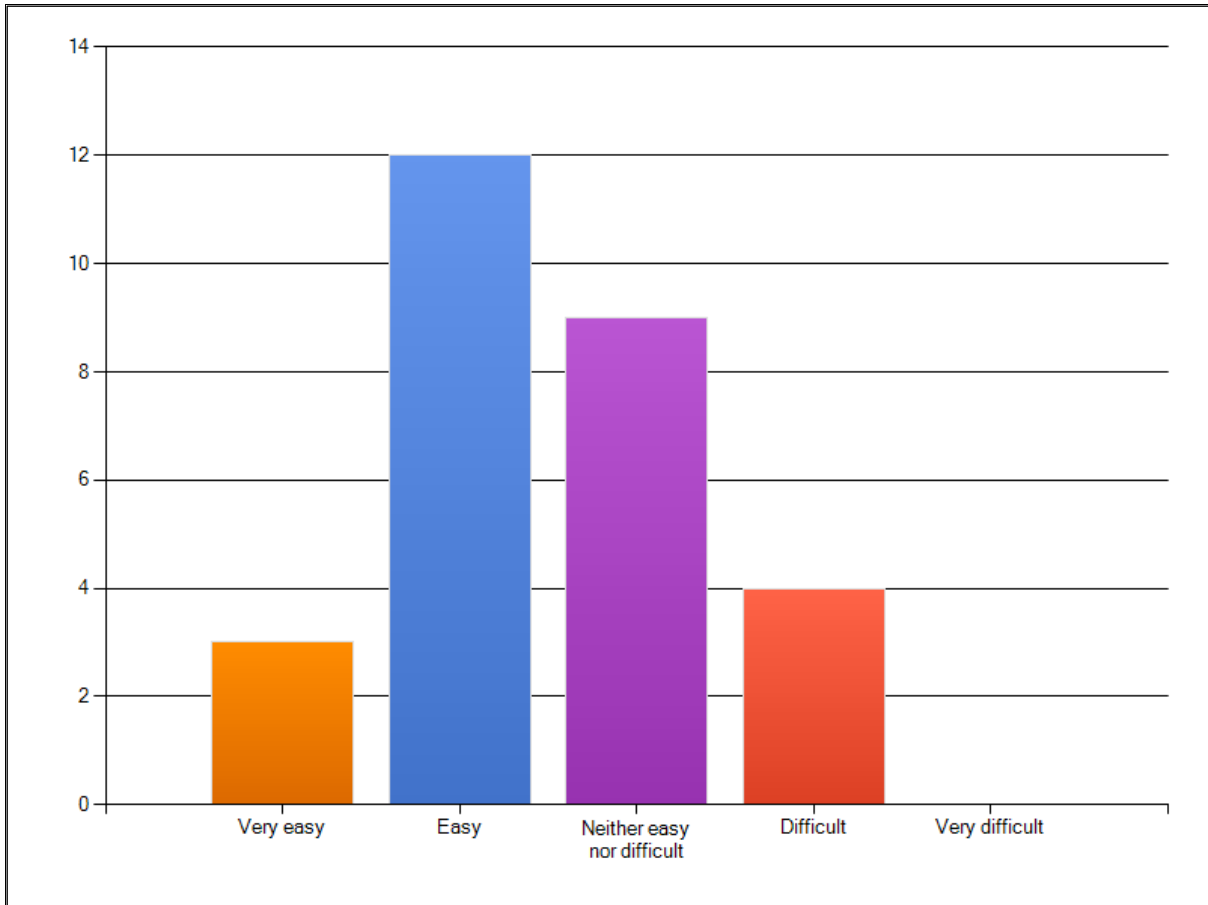


Figure 3: How easy/difficult it was felt to use government services.

3 comments were made. They each respectively explained their difficulty with certain services, which were as follows:

- 1) Getting clear, forthcoming and correct information from immigration staff. This respondent felt advice shouldn't involve being told to consult a migration agent as it's the job of immigration to provide sufficient advice.
- 2) Accessing housing or accessing housing services. This was contrasted with the ease of access to other services.
- 3) The poor promotion of employment opportunities (i.e. trade and other professions) in Muslim communities. It was noted that in contrast to this, positions in ASIO and Police are well promoted within the community.

Adapting to the needs of Muslims

More respondents felt there is a need for Australian Government services to adapt than those who felt there to be no need to adapt. 8 people skipped the question dealing with this. Figure 4 below illustrates the responses to this question.

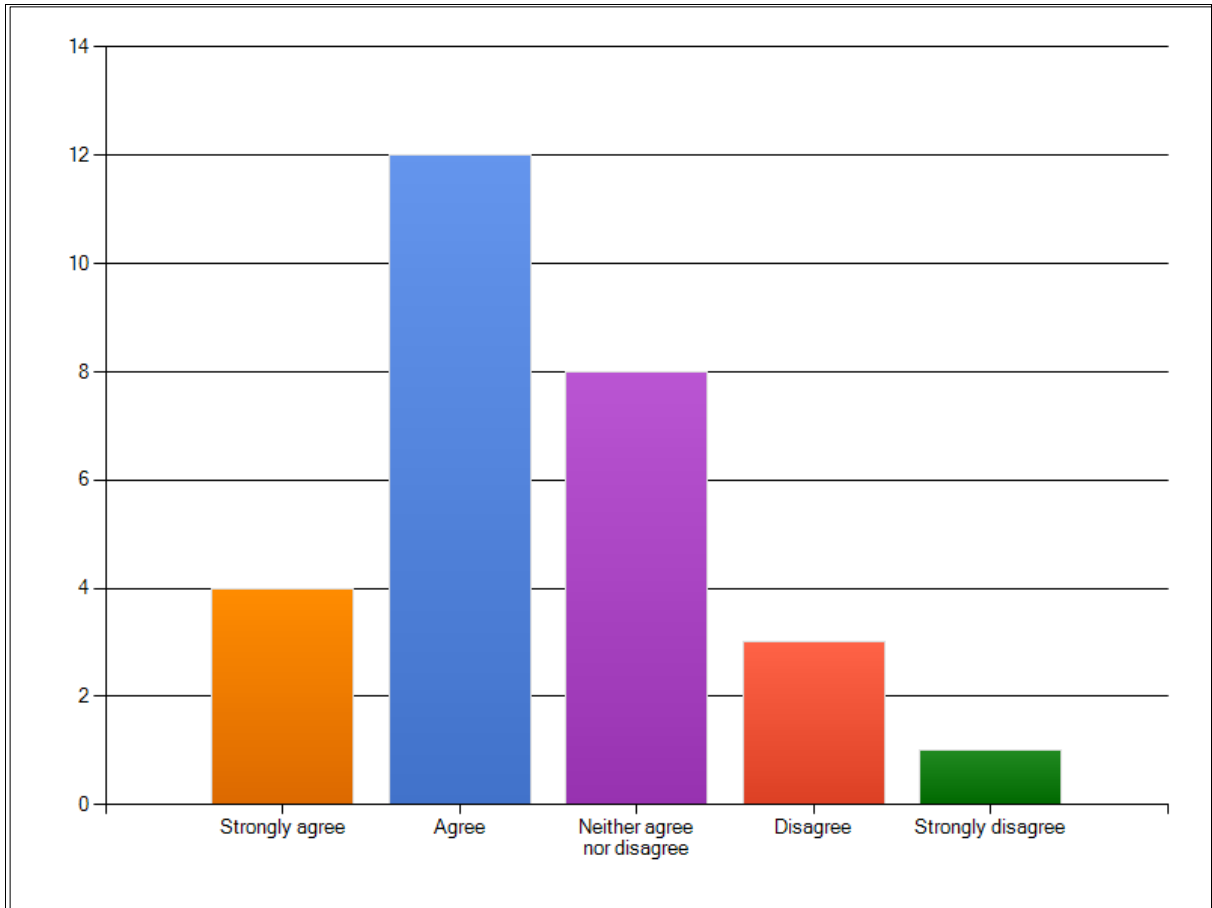


Figure 4: Whether government services need to adapt to the needs of Muslims.

One open response to this question added a fuller understanding to why respondents felt there was a need for government services to adapt. This response is summarised below:

- 1) This respondent stressed that in hospital delivery suites, it would be culturally appropriate that only females be involved in the delivery of the baby. The respondent says: "I feel that was very insensitive to have a male doing something which is extremely personal on a cultural and religious level. And to make matters worse and show a complete lack of understanding and respect was to have a male who was learning come in the room with the male who attended to my wife - I'm sure it wasn't life-or-death that he had to attend. Even if you are not a Muslim there are plenty of non-Muslims who I'm sure would find this uncomfortable. I don't understand why this has to be communicated in a survey - this should be basic common sense." The respondent highlights that "there is a lack of understanding and education regarding other cultures/religions (and even people's preferences)..." This respondent also praised the initiative to offer interpreting services but disagrees that it should be made compulsory at antenatal appointment if the husband can interpret as this is a waste of 'tax-payer dollars'.

Other responses were less relevant to the question. They are as follows:

- 2) One respondent complained of their repeated failure to find work with Queensland health, and government and private institutes. They complain of getting no feedback for why they were rejected except for the reason that when they get married and have kids they wouldn't be able to work. Hence they can only work as a volunteer.
- 3) Another respondent stressed that all Australians are migrants except aboriginal Australians

Problems when using government services

17 respondents reported experiencing no problems. 9 reported experiencing problems. 10 skipped the question pertaining to this topic. The open responses to this question are summarised below:

- 1) One respondent made several complaints regarding Centrelink. She complained of the treatment from a Centrelink staff when applying for Newstart after being forced to resign. "The Centrelink rep treated me as if I had done something wrong and determined that I would have to do without payments for 13 weeks which left me very stressed out and belittled." This respondent also claims that in order to notify Centrelink that she became unemployed her only option was to call from her mobile phone which accrued a bill of \$44. Centrelink not only failed to compensate her for this but noted that she made a poor choice to use her mobile to call Centrelink. She summarises as follows: "dealing with Centrelink lately has been very stressful especially since I have always been truthful and honest with them about any changes in my life! I have not bothered appealing their decision because it seems like I will just be wasting more money and time!" This respondent also felt the website lacked enough information.
- 2) One respondent had problems with halal food.
- 3) Another complained of failure to obtain a refund for fees charged by the immigration department due to incorrect advice given by the immigration department to the respondent.
- 4) One respondent reiterated their complaint about male doctors possibly having to attend a child's delivery in hospital.
- 5) Another respondent complained about long wait times on the telephone and the inconsistency in the information given by call centre personnel.
- 6) One respondent complained of the complexity involved when applying for things by filling in forms, resulting in errors made in the form which in turn resulted in a loss of benefits. They complained there should be more help to fill in forms, and such forms are

impractical as they take too long which is a problem especially for people who are working and have little spare time.

7) Finally, one respondent complained of not being respected enough to be heard fully by government staff and that such staff then think they know what's best for the respondent.

8) Some responses seemed irrelevant to the question. For example, one complained of their experience of racism and discrimination in their workplace. Another similarly complained of the inability to secure a job interview, even at Qld government workplaces and universities, unless they gave a different name. However this respondent after securing an interview using a fake name could not then pass the interview stage and secure a job.

Services that are seen as the best

6 respondents reported having no good experiences. 19 reported having good experiences. 11 did not respond.

Of the 19 who reported good experience, 8 were on health related services, 1 on autocat, 4 regarding Centrelink, and 6 seemed to be generally satisfied with government services. This is illustrated in Figure 5 below.

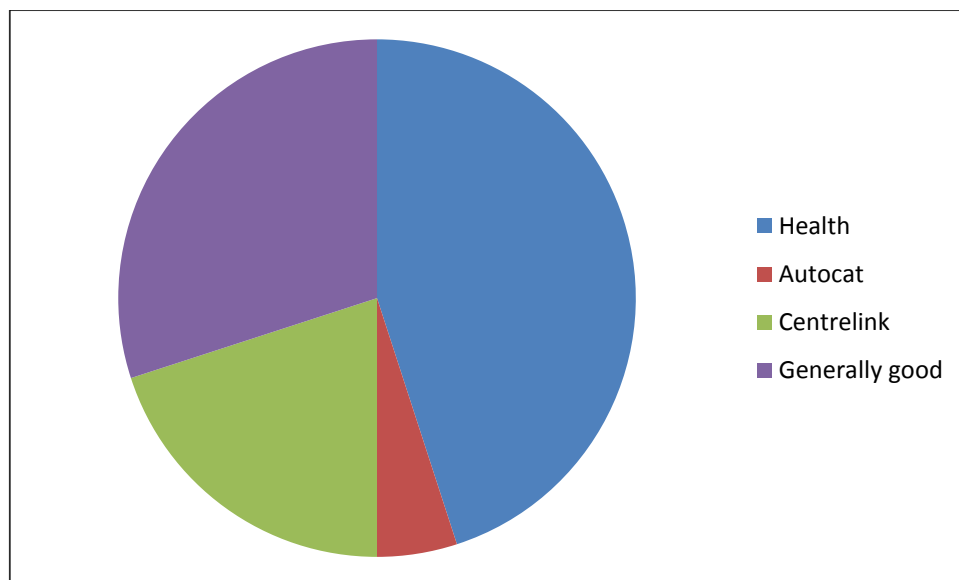


Figure 5: Which services are seen as the best.

The justification for health related services included:

- timely ambulances,

- treatment at a hospital's emergency department (albeit after twice being sent home incorrectly),
- hospital care for patients,
- online Medicare,
- free G.P. access, and
- quick and good treatment in a private hospital.

Autocat was justified because the respondent had good experiences with it.

Centrelink was justified as the best service due to:

- staff service,
- Family Tax Benefit,
- baby bonus, and
- prompt payment of (carer) allowances.

Responses that indicated government services were generally good included:

- "always helpful and caring,"
- if the right person addresses your complaint then positive things happen, and
- many non-deserving people are helped.

Ways to inform Muslims about government services and how to access them

Responses included which mediums are the best ways that the Australian government can communicate its services as well as further advice on how to accomplish this. Figure 6 below illustrates the frequency of mediums mentioned. Letters and flyers was the most frequently mentioned medium of best communication. Other suggestions included in person communication (including but not restricted to attending events where interested people would attend), having a database where every individual can opt for the medium best suited to them, and utilising Islamic organisations. One respondent reiterated their gross dissatisfaction with Centrelink's phone service and thus felt that telephone was definitely not a suitable medium.

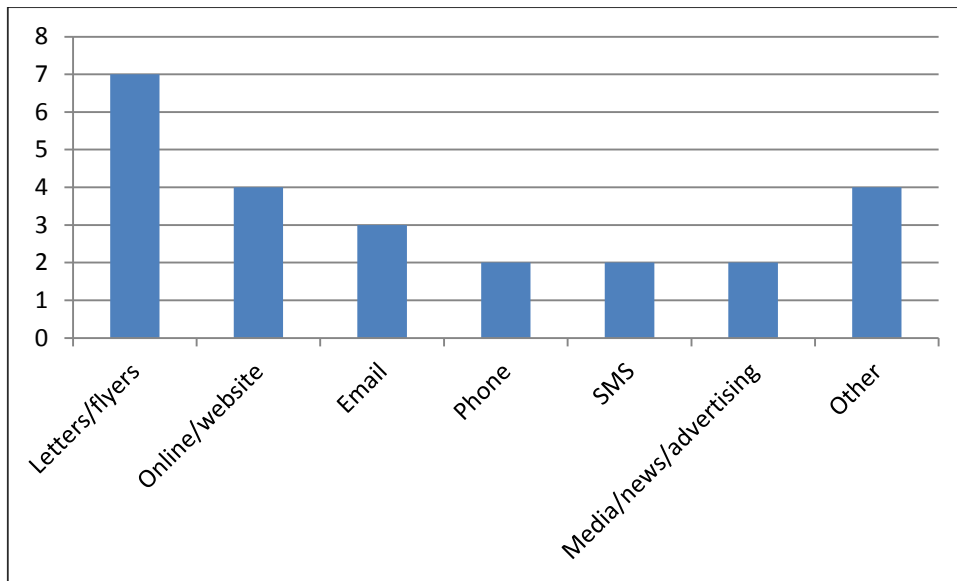


Figure 6: Best ways the government can tell Muslims about its services and how to access them.

Suggestions for how to best communicate services and improve access included:

- Simplified procedure (of access and applications);
- Clarity and easy to understand language (especially for people with poor English);
- Accessible complaints staff;
- Improving customer service;
- Bridge the gap between ethnic communities;
- Non-discriminatory recruitment of staff for diversity of ethnic backgrounds;
- Providing information upon arrival in Australia and a providing a point of contact for non-English speaking migrants;
- Improve education of service providers on what Australian Government services are provided so they can best help their customers;
- Community specific information sessions.

Improving access to Australian Government services

5 felt there were no ways the Australia Government's services could be improved. 21 felt there was ways to improve the services. 10 did not respond to the question dealing with this.

Responses varied but could be clustered around several themes which follow issue.

Communication with Muslim customers

- Centrelink's voice recognition telephone system doesn't understand me and others I know.

- Hold times on the phone with Centrelink are too long. Employ more people to answer phones who speak English that makes sense.
- Have community workers who speak the same language.
- More translation services.
- Do not make customers feel rushed or stupid for asking a question about something they do not understand.

Staff attributes

- Several respondents said that staff need to be culturally and religiously sensitive (e.g. take into account that Friday is the Muslim holy day, no touch between genders, no exposure of female body to male doctors, etc.)
- That Staff be qualified and well trained.
- Employ staff who are Muslim and hail from different ethnicities.
- One respondent said Muslims either aren't allowed to work for Centrelink or work in higher positions in Centrelink.

Ease of service to customers

- Physically assist clients.
- Make things simple.
- Do not repeat or ask for the same information within one year of it having been supplied.

Employment

- No racism or discrimination based on faith in employment.

Increase awareness of services

- Services should be present at and display their information at events like fairs and fetes, Eid festivals, and at relevant stores.
- Post relevant information to people, like those receiving allowances.
- Explain/offer other options that could be accessed by individuals.

Possibly relevant points:

- Open discussion.
- "Do not preach anything in media about Islam which they do not know."

- “Centrelink is the worst. They never seem to get it right. Leaving people from non-English speaking backgrounds in a lot of debt.”

Adhering to specific standards so people of different culture or language don’t find it more difficult to get the help they need.

Majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that there should be specific standards. 11 skipped the question dealing with this. Figure 7 shows how respondents answered this question.

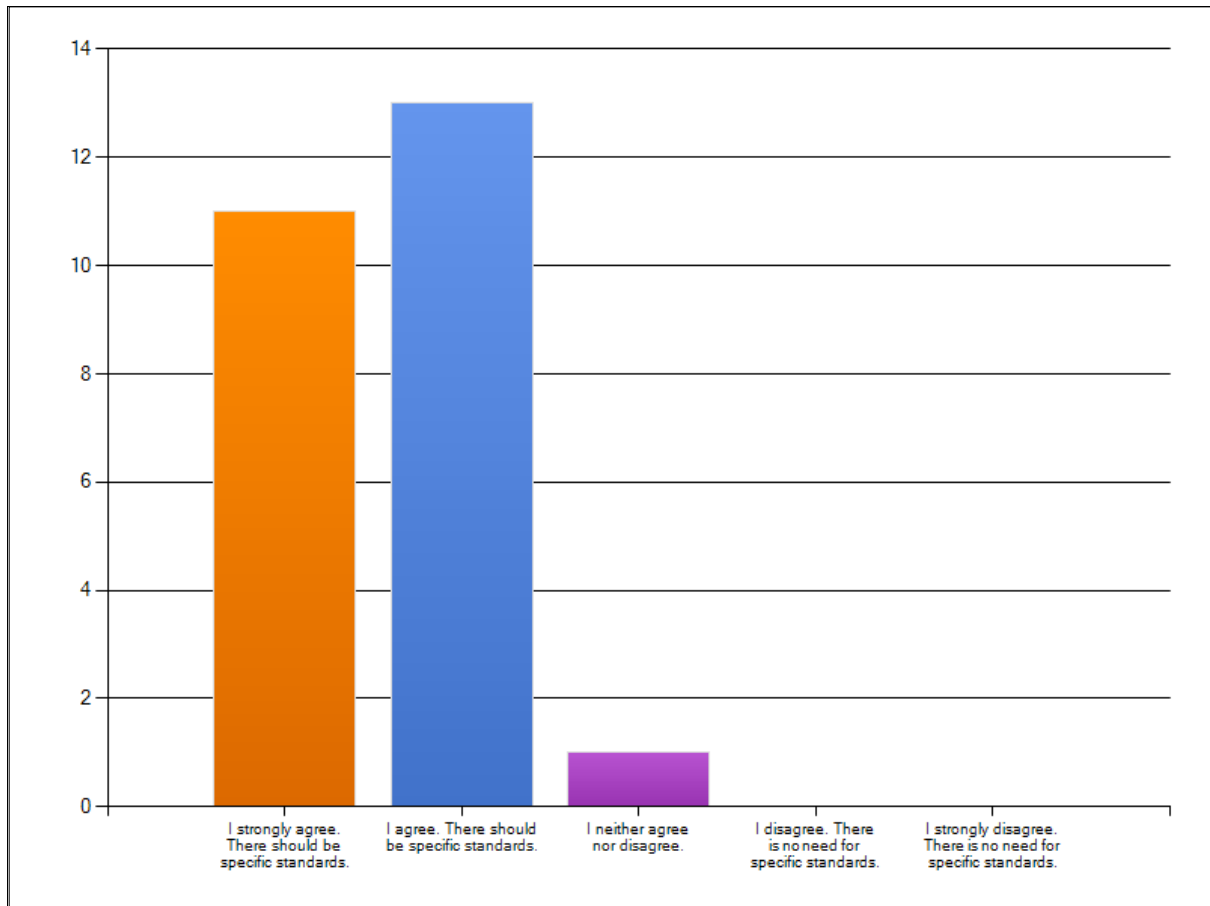


Figure 7: Whether specific standards should be adhered to make sure culture or language does not make it harder for people to get the help they need.

The 6 open responses were varied. They are summarised below.

- Two acknowledged that the government has or tries to live up to cultural standards. Although they admitted the government falls short of these standards sometimes, e.g. in the health sector.
- Standards must address ethnic difficulty.
- There is a need to better help those from non-English speaking backgrounds. Having said this, the respondent acknowledged the government’s utilization of interpreter services.

- Two spoke of racism, in recruitment processes and towards Muslim woman wearing hijab. One comment that illustrated this point was: “some of the white Australians think Muslim women with hijab are an alien race and not be allowed to live or come to Australia.”

End comments and recommendations

A number of respondents acknowledged that they find it easy to use government services or felt the government is generally serving them well. However this survey also showed that many feel the government should accommodate for the cultural, religious and linguistic differences of Muslims living in Australia. Many insights emerged from this survey. These included: consideration of Muslim values in hospital settings, overcoming linguistic difficulties, respecting and affirming Muslim customers, implementing suitable ways to increase awareness of government services, as well as other points including general points that may not necessarily be specific to Muslims.

A number of recommendations specific for the Muslim community can be made from the findings of this survey.

- If not already done so, it would be prudent to educate staff in government services about cultural, religious and linguistic differences when working with Muslim clientele. This would involve concerns such as:
 - differences in pronunciation when communicating in English,
 - the need to talk slowly and check for understanding,
 - clear and simple-worded written information,
 - no touching between genders,
 - a female’s refusal to remove clothing in front of men,
 - observance of the five daily prayers and the Friday congregational prayers,
 - fasting in Ramadan,
 - requirement to eat only halal food,
 - refusal to be alone in the same room with a staff member of the opposite gender,
 - lack of eye contact between members of the opposite gender,
 - and other concerns specific to different cultural backgrounds.
- Staff whilst not intending to communicate racism may be conceived as conveying this perhaps due to different understandings in their verbal and non-verbal communication. Hence perhaps staff in government services may avail from training to build awareness of

their interpersonal communication so they are not perceived by those of other cultures as unempathic or rude (and thereby perceived as racist).

- They government can investigate modification of protocols so that they don't contradict Muslim values, such as facilitating the availability of female staff in hospital birth suites.
- Government services may also promote their services at Muslim community events and by organising community-specific information sessions.
- Simplify and assist in the completion of forms and making applications.
- Recruit staff from the Muslim community.

More general recommendations, some of which may already be in place, include:

- Increase the number of telephone operators at Centrelink.
- Facilitate accurate and consistent information given by various staff.
- Promote more non-government employment opportunities.
- Increase sympathy when handling complaints.
- Train staff to be aware of other services offered by the government.

No respondent elected employment services as the best government service, although some did report using them. One did report a difficulty in securing a job. The aggrieved respondent attributed their perpetual failure to their Muslim identity. Unfortunately no extra responses on employment services were present in the data. In light of this, it may be beneficial if further attention were placed on improving employment services for Muslim clients. Perhaps Muslim job seekers could be assisted in how to meet interview panels who might harbour doubts and fears towards Muslims.

A shortcoming of the research undertaken in this paper is the small number of respondents. Not all sub-communities responded to the survey. For example nobody from South-East Asian background participated. However this survey included both those who were pleased with government services and those who were displeased. Hence there is useful information that can be gained from the responses as highlighted in this report. If there were more time more participation from other Muslims in the community would have been sought. It may also have been enlightening to ask whether participants were refugees, recent immigrants or longer residing members of Australia.

The Council of Imams Queensland as well as the supporting organisations would like to thank the Australian Government for taking the initiative to seek out the information contained in this paper. Muslims in Australia would find it reassuring knowing that the Australian Government are concerned

about Muslims' appraisal of government services and that the Australian Government aspires to better serve its Muslim residents.

Appendix A - Survey items

“Welcome.

This survey is about your experiences with Australian Government services.

Please proceed if you are a Muslim residing in Queensland.”

Demographics

1. What is your age?

(18 – 80+)

2. What is your gender

- Male
- Female

3. Please state your ethnic background:

- Afghani
- Anglo Australian
- Arab/Middle Eastern
- Bosnian
- Fijian-Indian
- Indian sub-continent

- Indigenous Australian
- Somali
- South African/Zimbabwe
- Turkish
- Other (please specify) _____

Survey Questions

4. What Australian Government services do you use most?

- Employment
- Health
- Welfare

Other (please specify)

5. Have you found it easy or difficult to use these services?

- Very easy
- Easy
- Neither easy nor difficult
- Difficult
- Very difficult

Would you like to make a comment?



6. In your experience, do Australian Government services adapt to the needs of people from your cultural or language background?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Would you like to make a comment?



7. If you have had problems, what were they? Did they get

resolved?

- I have had NO problems
- I have had problems (please comment on the problems and how they were resolved))



8. If you have had good experiences, which services do you feel provided the best service?

Why do you think they were the best?

- I have had NO good experiences
- I have had good experiences (please state the service(s) and why they were the best)



9. What are the best ways for the Australian Government to tell you about its services and how to access them?



10. Are there ways Australian Government services could be improved to help

you or your community access them better?

- There are NO ways that Australian Government services could be improved
- There are ways that Australian Government services could be improved (please comment)

11. Most Australian Government services have standards about how they deliver services to you.

Do you think there should be specific standards to make sure culture or language doesn't make it harder for people to get the help they need?

- I strongly agree. There should be specific standards.
- I agree. There should be specific standards.
- I neither agree nor disagree.
- I disagree. There is no need for specific standards.
- I strongly disagree. There is no need for specific standards.

Would you like to make a comment?