



Multicultural Access & Equity in Online Information and Services

June 2013 (revised October 2014)

The Australian Government's commitment to supporting a culturally-diverse nation is expressed in the *Multicultural Access and Equity Policy: Respecting diversity. Improving responsiveness (2013) (the Policy)*. This policy includes a commitment that government programs and services will be accessible to eligible Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and provide equitable outcomes to them.

Why should I?

Government communication, information and online services should meet the needs of a diverse Australian community. Some information and services may even be specifically intended for an audience that has a known high level of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The Policy covers all engagement and communication of government departments and agencies with multicultural communities, not just direct service delivery.

Ensuring that information and services meet the needs of a diverse audience will help improve public access to government and improve the value of agency investment in the online channel.

What should I do?

There are a range of actions that agencies can undertake to improve their online content for users from diverse backgrounds.

Equitable access for culturally and linguistically diverse audiences

As part of establishing online service standards and developing customer service charters, consider services to people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Consider how they can access the charter and provide feedback about online services in their own language, where appropriate.

Language

Use plain English

Review the language used by your agency and simplify it, where possible. This change can have benefits for many people in the Australian community, not just those from linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Where complex information needs to be provided in its original form (e.g. a legal statement), consider developing a plain English summary that presents the information in simpler terms.

For example, the australia.gov.au website provides a [plain English summary of its privacy statement](#) that complements its [full privacy statement](#).

Consider making information available online in other languages

Consider the value of making information available in languages other than English.

There are many factors that can affect the business case for providing content in other languages:

- the size of the potential audience for material in each language
- the extent to which that audience is proficient in English
- alternative mechanisms (existing or potential) for providing information to that audience
- the proposed method of translation (professional interpreting service or automated translations) and the risks and benefits of that method
- benefits from making additional culturally-appropriate changes to the information to maximise the relevance and value of the information to specific sub-audiences

Where translations are provided, the design of a website should make them easy to find. Navigational guidance to their location should be provided in the same language(s) as the translated content.

Non-English content must be identified appropriately in mark-up i.e. metadata elements, language elements, or the HTML language (lang) attribute.

In addition to providing documents in other languages, consider adding alternative non-English caption options to appropriate video material you might have online. Many video players, including YouTube, are capable of supporting multiple caption files, enabling multiple language options for the captions.

Use the online channel to promote services for people from diverse backgrounds that are available through other channels

Websites are a good place to promote the existence of services for people from diverse backgrounds, such as telephone interpreter services and bilingual staff, even if those services can't be directly accessed on the web.

Consider how search engine features might support users from diverse backgrounds

Most search engines offer features that can allow agencies to customise the results they display in response to given terms rather than rely purely on the search algorithm. This may include a synonym list function, which can be instructed to recognise non-English versions of common search terms, and deliver results for their English equivalents.

Consider text-to-speech options

Some people from linguistically diverse backgrounds can understand spoken English better than they can read printed English. Depending on the audience of your agency's website and its information and services, agencies could consider the provision of text-to-speech options directly on the appropriate web pages.

For example, the Department of Social Services ([DSS](#)) and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research ([ACIAR](#)) have both implemented text-to-speech options on their websites to allow visitors to listen to key information without requiring any additional technology.

Presentation and design

Use design elements that are universally understood and culturally appropriate

Use universally recognisable symbols, words and figures to ensure that they can be understood by all users, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background. Ensure that navigation controls are intuitive and appropriate.

Adhering to the Web Guide's [Common Page Elements](#) advice can also assist with creating a more familiar user experience.

Present data in ways that are clear to international audiences

The understanding of dates, currencies, weights & measures, telephone numbers and addresses may all be affected by an audience's cultural and linguistic background. Ensure that such information is provided in the clearest possible manner to minimise any potential for misunderstanding.

For example, standard formats for certain information differs around the world; the date 7/1/12 would be understood as 7 January 2012 in Australia, but as 1 July 2012 in the United States and Canada.

Australian government agencies are encouraged to present this information, as appropriate, as:

- Date – spell out the month, for example “7 January 2012”
- Time –specify the applicable time-zone/city/state, for example “2:30pm AEST” or “11:00am Sydney / 9:00am Perth”
- Phone – include the international code if targeting an international audience, for example “+61 (0)2 6215 2222”
- Currency – identify country currency as appropriate, for example “\$1,567.89 AUD”; if including currency in a non-English publication, consider using the international standard of a space instead of a comma between each group of three, for example “\$1 567.89 AUD”, as appropriate.

Additional advice on [website internationalisation](#) is available from the W3C.

Develop mechanisms to support intermediary information providers

Some people from diverse backgrounds may rely on others to assist them with information gathering and access to services. This intermediary might be a family member (possibly a younger family member) or it might be an ethnic media group. Consider what information and resources might support these intermediaries and how this indirect flow of information can impact on the best way to present information online.

Testing and evaluation

Consider user testing with a focus on culturally and linguistically diverse audiences

[Usability testing](#) is an important part of developing a relevant and valuable web presence. Direct engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse users is the best way to determine the effectiveness of your efforts to support their needs and identify future opportunities for improvement.

Consider ways in which analytics and feedback can be used to improve understanding of the experience for users from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Website analytics packages can provide a lot of information about general user habits when they visit your website, but they offer little with regard to cultural and linguistic diversity. Consider supplementing your analytics with surveys and focus groups that will allow you to investigate this issue to help determine your agency's approach to online information and service delivery.

Data collected on issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity should be consistent with the Australian Bureau of Statistics' [Standards for Statistics on Cultural and Language Diversity \(ABS catalogue no. 1289.0\)](#).

Other issues

Ensure that third-party service providers are aware of and responsive to issues of access and equity

Online information and services delivered by a third party should adhere to the same standard of access and equity provision as information and services delivered directly by your agency.

Inserting appropriate references to access and equity considerations in procurement documentation will ensure that potential service providers are aware of this requirement even before they are engaged. Appropriate monitoring or reporting processes as part of the negotiated service agreement will help emphasise the importance of this issue to government and provide a mechanism for you to assess the service provider's work.

Use compliance with WCAG 2.0 as an opportunity to improve access for people with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Australian Government websites are required to [comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) version 2.0](#) as per the [Web Accessibility National Transition Strategy](#). Many mechanisms that promote accessibility will also improve access for people from diverse backgrounds. In particular, take note of the requirements under WCAG's [Guideline 3.1](#) 'Make text content readable and understandable'.

Accessibility requirements specify that real text should be used, not images of text, in preparing non-English documents, including PDFs. This is required for access by reading technologies and also enables search engine indexing.

Resources:

- *The People of Australia – Australia's Multicultural Policy (2011)*
<https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/programs-policy/access-and-equity/multicultural-access-and-equity-policy-toolkit>
- *Multicultural Access and Equity Policy: Respecting diversity. Improving responsiveness (2013)*
<https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/programs-policy/multicultural-access-and-equity>
- *Multicultural Access and Equity Policy Toolkit (DIAC, 2013)*
<http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/programs-policy/access-and-equity/multicultural-access-and-equity-policy-toolkit>
- *Multicultural Language Services Guidelines (DIAC, 2013)*
<http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/programs-policy/multicultural-access-and-equity/multicultural-language-services-guidelines-for-australian-government-agencies>
- *Website internationalisation resources (W3C)*
<http://www.w3.org/International/resources>
- *Australian Government Web Guide*
<http://webguide.gov.au/>