



QUEENSLAND PROGRAM OF ASSISTANCE TO SURVIVORS OF TORTURE AND TRAUMA (QPASTT)

SUBMISSION TO JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE INQUIRY TO THE ROLE OF PERMANENT MIGRATION IN NATION BUILDING

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For further comment or inquiries, please contact Stephanie Long (Systemic Advocacy Lead)

stephanielong@qpastt.org.au

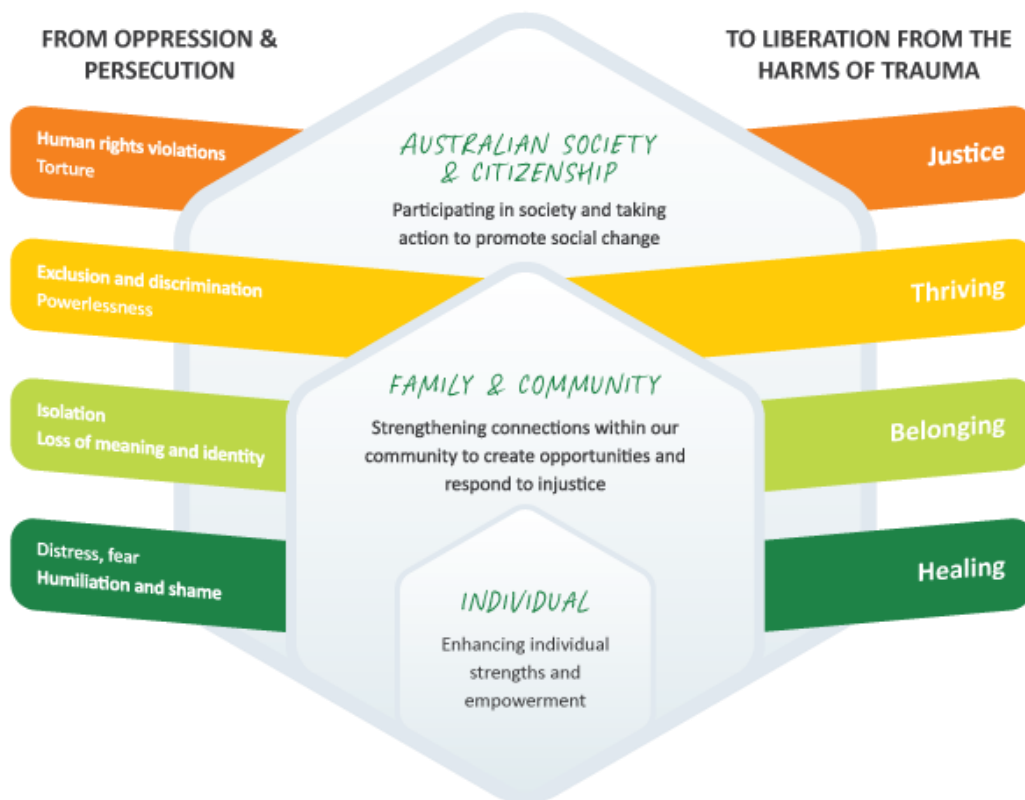
(07) 3391 6677

ABOUT QPASTT

Founded in 1995, QPASTT (Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma) provides specialised, culturally responsive services to promote the health and wellbeing of people in Australia who have sought safety from persecution, torture and war related trauma.

QPASTT is committed to creating a safe, inclusive and equitable environment for people from all genders, sexualities, religions and cultures. Our vision is for people from refugee backgrounds to live lives liberated from the harms of torture, trauma and human rights injustice. Our purpose is to nurture meaningful futures by assisting people from refugee backgrounds to heal, belong and thrive in our community.

Our refugee trauma recovery framework



QPASTT acknowledges the First Peoples of Australia and their leaders past, present and emerging. We recognise the continuing trauma caused by losses of children, language, lore and land and the impact that this continues to have on psychological, physical and spiritual wellbeing. We recognise that since time immemorial, First Peoples have nurtured communities of belonging and thriving and we work in solidarity towards a future of healing and justice.

QPASTT is a non-profit Company Limited by Guarantee and a registered charity with no political or religious affiliations. The Commonwealth and Queensland governments fund our work.



QPASTT is a member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT), a network of eight specialist rehabilitation agencies that respond to the needs of survivors of torture and trauma who have come to Australia from overseas. There is a FASSTT member agency in each state and territory in Australia.

OUR WORK

In 2021/2022, we supported 7,796 clients from over 85 countries through both individual or family counselling and group work – a 17% increase since 2019. Culture and community-based healing and connectedness is the foundation of our approach to wellbeing. 5,645 people participated in QPASTT social, therapeutic and wellbeing groups, events and activities, co-designed with community members to meet their needs. 2,151 people engaged in over 15,000 counselling sessions, more than 40% of whom were 25 years of age or under, and 218 were people seeking asylum.

While the full terms of reference for this inquiry are important, our response focusses on the first term of reference: The role of permanent migration in nation building, cultural diversity, and social cohesion. This indicates the issues that are most significant to the work that we do as a refugee trauma recovery agency.

We take this opportunity to recognise the numerous other inquiries and reviews that are occurring at this time, including the Parkinson Review of the Migration System. There are commonalities in the issues raised in these processes. In particular, we draw attention to the following policy changes that will have a positive impact on nation building, cultural diversity and social cohesion:

- We support calls to extend right and pathway to permanent residence for all people found to be in need of protection from persecution – ending ‘temporariness’
- We support calls to increase the humanitarian intake recognising the social, cultural and economic potential of a supportive and inclusive humanitarian program for Australia’s vibrant future
- We support calls for a cessation of held detention for all refugees and people seeking asylum

We also recognise and support called to review and address the prohibitive language skills testing requirements for migrants who have overseas qualifications as well as those who complete qualifications in Australia. This is a substantial financial barrier to engaging in the workforce, to Australia as a whole benefitting from the diverse skills and knowledge that many migrants bring, and addressing skills shortages in a range of professions.

The content of this submission is from the experience of clients and communities we work with. Thank you for the opportunity to share concerns and thoughts of the terms of reference this inquiry.



THE ROLE OF PERMANENT MIGRATION IN NATION BUILDING, CULTURAL DIVERSITY, AND SOCIAL CHANGE.

Permanent migration is highly valued by individuals, families and communities who have arrived in Australia via humanitarian pathways and asylum seeking processes. Being able to offer permanent protection to people who have experienced persecution on the basis of their race or ethnicity, membership of a social group, or through their religious or political affiliation, is an important component of Australia's commitment to human rights. It also demonstrates our nation's commitment to multiculturalism and diversity, and offers a "demographic dividend" to compensate for our aging population (Productivity Commission 2016).

However, there is an additional aspect of permanent migration that is highly valued by people from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, which currently is not able to be realised by a number of people from marginalised backgrounds: the opportunity to become Australian citizens.

Citizenship signals welcome, inclusion and belonging in Australia, allowing full rights of political engagement in our nation. Citizenship is a requirement for obtaining an Australian passport and receiving protection when travelling overseas, including travel to country of origin. Citizenship is a requirement for sponsoring community and family members, and for facilitating family reunification, which for many, is a crucial component of healing from refugee torture and trauma.

Despite these clear benefits to gaining citizenship, barriers do exist which can have long-term devastating effects on the wellbeing of permanent residents. This in turn has the effect of impairing their wholehearted economic and social participation. One important barrier to the citizenship aspirations of the communities QPASTT works with in Queensland, is the challenge of successfully completing the citizenship test. An estimated 30% of all clients assisted through our intake processes seek advocacy and assistance about citizenship.

The current process of gaining citizenship requires an applicant to¹:

- be a permanent resident of Australia for four years. This is currently unattainable for many people who have arrived in Australia via irregular maritime arrival or through the restricted provision of temporary protection visas only
- score 75% or over, and pass all five values questions, on the citizenship test to test their knowledge of Australia
- have a basic knowledge of English language, which is – also measured by scoring over 75% on the citizenship test.

The Department of Home Affairs website further states that:

Some applicants do not have to sit the test but must have an interview to show they:

- *understand what it means to become an Australian citizen*
- *have an adequate knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship*

¹ Department of Home Affairs website <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/citizenship/become-a-citizen/permanent-resident#Eligibility>

QPASTT's Concerns

While there is the possibility of applying for an exemption, in QPASTT's experience, exemptions are exceptionally difficult to have approved. Numerous clients and community members we engage with make repeated attempts to apply for citizenship without success. Access to test sites in regional locations is limited.

TOWNSVILLE CASE STUDY

Community members and staff in Townsville report concerns that despite Townsville being a regional centre, there is no local availability of citizenship interviews and testing. Rather, people are required to travel 700km to attend interviews and tests in Cairns. For individuals in rural and remote areas of North and Western Queensland, it is assumed that the requirement to travel to a designated major city is even further. This is a substantial economic burden on those applying for citizenship in terms of travel costs, time off work/study, and loss of income.

Reliance on a written test in English without interpreter support, is not a reliable or effective indicator of a person's understanding of citizenship, nor of their acceptance of the responsibilities and privileges of Australian citizenship. Additionally, the test conditions can induce a level of stress where even those with strong English language skills are failing. There is consistent anecdotal evidence from refugee communities across Queensland that this is despite attending citizenship classes, and extensive hours of pre-test independent study.

QPASTT staff have frequently heard accounts of individuals attempting the test in excess of five times, incurring significant cost at having to reapply and pay application fees after every fourth attempt. Individuals have spent in excess of two years studying for the test, and make multiple test attempts. QPASTT also notes that the incidence of repeated failed attempts is more likely for people who have had limited formal schooling or have not had the privilege of being literate in their first language. It is also apparent that these challenges disproportionately affect women from refugee background who are more likely to have had limited education opportunities and in Australia, are likely to have fulfilled caretaking responsibilities in the family home and therefore have had fewer opportunities to engage in English languages classes and economic opportunities.

We recommend:

1. Reinstate oral interpreters to support people with barriers to language due to hardship and refugee experience
2. Grounds for exemption should include limited schooling, disability, literacy in first language and trauma history.
3. An audit of locations for interviews and tests be completed, with solutions to ensure equitable access for people living in regional, rural and remote areas.

Impact of barriers to citizenship

For many, the level of distress caused by repeated failure of the citizenship test renders citizenship an unobtainable aspiration. This can have the following impact:

- Chronic and persistent feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Triggering trauma memories/re-traumatisation, and in some cases fuelling suicide ideation
- Loss of meaning and aspiration for the future
- Sense of exclusion. Despite being offered protection from harm in Australia, there is a sense of not genuinely belonging or feeling accepted.



Failure to obtain citizenship has also created substantial distress for those who desperately want to travel to see and support ageing or seriously unwell family members, or to sponsor family members who are remaining in dangerous situations. This creates substantial moral distress when it becomes impossible to meet cultural obligations to protect and provide for family members, regardless of geographical separation.

For trauma survivors, this sense of exclusion and loss of hope in their future, detrimentally impairs mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing influences our ability to manage fluctuations in life stressors and opportunities, as well as determines the ability to flourish. The Queensland Alliance of Mental Health describes mental wellbeing challenges as being “compounded when we have exhausted our personal resources: a loss of opportunities, loss of roles, changing relationships, loss of purpose, experiencing racism or sexism discrimination, loss of economic means, economic instability, inability to contribute, loss of autonomy and personal agency.” (2022, p23).

A FACTOR OF EXCLUSION & DISCRIMINATION FOR AFRICAN COMMUNITIES ACCORDING TO UN WORKING GROUP

In December 2022, the United Nations Working Group on Experts of People of African Descent completed a mission in Australia. The end of mission statement was thorough and unapologetic. The Working Group identified prohibited language requirements for qualification recognition and citizenship as amongst the factors underpinning discrimination, exclusion, intolerance experience by people of African descent in Australia. The persistent systemic barriers to inclusion and equity investigated by the Working Group led to the statement that “[s]ettlement is a protection tool that may translate into a pathway to prison.” (2022; pg4).

Recommendations

In summary, QPASTT has three recommendations specific to the issue of citizenship for migrants, particularly those from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds:

- I. Reinstatement of the oral interpreter: QPASTT and the refugee communities we engage with in Queensland strongly recommend the reinstatement of an oral interpreter who can provide language support for applicants doing the citizenship test.
- II. Additional grounds for exemption: Limited education, a trauma history, disability and literacy in first language should be recognised as grounds for exemption to sitting the citizenship test
- III. More equitable access to test locations: QPASTT recommends that an audit of locations for interviews and tests be completed, in order to ensure more equitable access for people living in regional, rural and remote areas.

References

Productivity Commission (2016) *Migration Intake to Australia Inquiry Report*. Available at <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/migrant-intake/report>

Queensland Alliance of Mental Health (2022) *Wellbeing First*. Second edition, November 2022. Available at <https://www.qamh.org.au/wellbeing/wellbeing-first/>

United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (2022) *End of Mission Statement*. Canberra 20 December 2022. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/racism/wgeapd/2022-12-20/2022-12-20-EOM-WGEPAD-Australia.pdf>

