



THE SOCIAL
RESEARCH CENTRE

Australia's Progress in the 21st Century: Qualitative report on community perspectives

March 2013

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Executive summary

Australia's progress in the 21st century (AP21C) is a strategic national research project. It aims to create a sound scientific foundation for the measurement of progress towards desirable long-term goals for the future Australia. AP21C is administered by the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) and is co-funded by ACOLA and VicHealth. The project has two major partners: VicHealth and the Australian National Development Index (ANDI). Supporting partners include the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), the Young & Well Collaborative Research Centre (YAW CRC), The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF).

The Social Research Centre was commissioned by ACOLA to carry out a pilot program, comprising seven focus groups (reported here) and an online survey (reported separately), with a view to undertaking an initial exploration of community perceptions in this area. Initial discussions outlining the AP21C recognised that 'the concept of progress requires multi-dimensional definition and measurement' (ACOLA, 2012¹). Thus, the findings of this pilot community study should be viewed alongside the work undertaken elsewhere in regard to defining and measuring progress. The findings from the focus groups thus provide a genuine dialogue among community members about what is important for them in thinking about Australia's progress.

Research Aim

The first stage of the AP21C pilot was designed to explore – in a focus group setting - language, values, goals and priorities expressed by the focus group participants when they talk about national progress. The aim of this early pilot work was also to identify some provisional recommendations for domains to be included in ANDI, and what these domains include and mean to the community. The findings from these seven focus groups also informed the design and content of the second part of the pilot program - an online survey of 1,000 people from across Australia. This survey will provide quantitative information on progress priorities and values and inform the development of a draft index methodology and framework.

Research method

The methodology was qualitative, delivered via focus groups which were moderated by a qualitative researcher from the Social Research Centre. Seven focus groups were held: four in Melbourne, two in Sydney and one in a town in regional Victoria. The groups were:

- Retired
- Families with children
- Young adults no children
- Working age no dependents
- Health problems
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), and
- Regional.

Whilst the sample was not designed to be representative in any statistical sense, the recruitment was tightly managed to ensure an appropriate mix of respondents within each group. With the permission of participants research sessions were audio-recorded, and these recordings were transcribed for the purposes of analysis (using NVivo software for the coding and management of the data).

A discussion guide was developed in consultation with the ACOLA team. Participants were also provided, in advance, with a Participant Information Sheet which explained the background and context to the research, and provided several prompts to encourage them to start to think about the issues in advance of attending the group.

¹ ACOLA (2012). *Australia's Progress in the 21st Century: imagining... defining... measuring*. March 2012 V.06.

Findings

The findings of this research are presented around four main domains: society, economy, environment and governance. These organising domains have been taken from the ABS Measures of Australia's Progress and provide a useful and complementary way of organising the data which emerged from the focus groups. In the main report a descriptive narrative is provided for each topic or issue raised by respondents. The key emergent themes, suggesting what is important for Australian society as it progresses, are summarised below.

Discussions around society

Cultural Diversity

- Different groups living alongside one another peacefully, safely and securely.
- Different communities all making a contribution to Australian society and recognising Australian norms (and the removal of barriers that might prevent them from doing so).
- An acceptance of different cultures, and tolerance between the different cultural groups.
- There is a learning from different cultures and what that can bring to Australian society.
- All groups are able to access the same level of support, regardless of their background.

Immigration

- Newcomers to Australia are appropriately supported to ensure that they are able to adapt to the Australian way of life.
- The immigration policy is robust and fair, thus enabling new migrants to make an important contribution to Australian society.

Social relationships and support networks

- Social networks are valued, and hence supported.
- Everyone has someone they can turn to or rely on if they need help or support.
- Society looks after families, the young, and the older generations.
- People care about each other and offer help when it is needed – at an individual level, community level and beyond.

Housing

- Everyone has, or will have, the opportunity to become a home owner.
- Support is in place to help those who are at risk of homelessness, or become homeless.
- No-one should live in homes that are of sub-standard quality.

Social welfare and social security

- Help and protection is provided to those who are most in need to ensure that basic needs are met.
- There is a welfare safety net that does not provide a disincentive to work.
- The welfare system and ethos encourages self-sufficiency and independence rather than reliance.
- The welfare system is not open to exploitation or misuse.

Transport

- Congestion is managed effectively so that it does not have a detrimental effect on society's and individuals' well-being.
- There is an efficient transport system which is well-managed and well planned to cope with demand now and in the future, so that people can get where they need to go to and from with relative ease.

Participation in recreation and leisure activities

- There are opportunities for individuals, families and communities to participate in (affordable) recreation and leisure activities.
- For individuals, families and communities to reap the benefits of such participation through reduced stress and strengthened families and communities.

Work-life balance

- There is an acceptable balance between work time and non-work time.

Neighbourhood and community safety

- Crime statistics remain stable or decrease.
- Australia remains a safe and secure country (in terms of personal risk and danger), and continues to be seen as such (in other words, that people 'feel' safe).
- There should not be any 'no go' areas that are perceived as unsafe.
- There should be no times of day or night that are perceived as unsafe.

National security

- Australia is in a strong position to be able to defend itself.

Health

- There are high standards within the health care system.
- As a nation, people are able to, and encouraged to, take responsibility for their own health.
- Everyone is able to access the health care they need, and has confidence in the standards of health care they receive.

Education

- Education is of a high standard, available and accessible to all.
- Teachers and schools are fully supported to be able to deliver a high standard of education regardless of where in Australia they are.
- The value of education, and its role in helping young people to achieve, is fully recognised across society.

Technology and innovation

- The pace of technological change is on a par with the rest of the world.
- Everyone is able to access technology and the benefits it can bring.
- Technology improves the way we communicate, rather than eroding it.

Information and the media

- People have access to high quality independent media reporting.
- There is a free press, and open access to public information.

The Economy

Employment

- There is not a poverty trap or benefits trap whereby people are financially better off on benefit payments than they would be in paid work.
- There are employment opportunities and choices for everyone who can work, and that there is the opportunity to progress and to be appropriately rewarded.
- Everyone contributes to the economy in some way.
- People are encouraged to pursue their employment aspirations.

Trade and industry

- Australia has a largely self-sufficient economy that is not overly reliant on overseas imports or overseas economies.
- There is an appropriate level of competition, with an appropriate private/public sector mix, to ensure that the economy is efficient.
- The country takes a long-term view in regard to the sustainability of the mining industry and alternatives in the future.
- A priority is placed on access to affordable high-quality Australian-made goods and produce.

Wealth and materialism

- People are able to maintain a good standard of living, but materialism does not come to dominate our society.
- The cost of living is managed so that everyone is able to afford the things that they need to have an acceptable standard of living and quality of life.
- The gap between the well-off and less well-off does not significantly increase.

Banking and finance

- There is a safe, secure, efficient and transparent financial sector.
- There is accountability and responsiveness (to the government and the economy) in the banking sector.

The Environment

- The natural environment is preserved to ensure continued access to clean air, clean water, green space and nature.
- There is managed growth (in the built environment) that works in harmony with the environment.

Governance

Governance and the political system

- All those who are eligible to vote do so, to take individual responsibility for the nation's governance.
- People of Australia have freedom to choose what they want to do, to be who they want to be, to speak freely, to vote freely and to travel freely.
- Politicians, and those who represent them, are trusted to do the best they can for the country.

Standards in public life

- Standards in public life are based on principles of good governance.
- There is openness and transparency around decision-making in government, particularly when it involves large-scale expenditure of public funds.
- The public have confidence in standards.

Policing

- The police are sufficiently resourced.
- The Police are able to operate effectively with appropriate levels of control and authority.

The justice system

- The legal system that is fair, and transparent, with a level playing field for everyone.
- There is sufficient opportunity to rehabilitate offenders and to enable them to subsequently make a valuable contribution to society.
- That appropriately punitive measures exist for serious crimes but that the justice system strikes a balance between punishment and rehabilitation.

1. Introduction

'Australia's a great country, we're right up there, you know' (Families with children)

Australia's progress in the 21st century (AP21C) is a strategic national research project. It aims to create a sound scientific foundation for the measurement of progress towards desirable long-term goals for the future Australia. AP21C is administered by the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) and is co-funded by ACOLA and VicHealth. The Social Research Centre was commissioned by ACOLA to carry out a pilot program, comprising seven focus groups and an online survey, with a view to undertaking an initial exploration of community perceptions in this area. This pilot study report presents the findings of the seven focus groups held in the spring of 2012.

1.1. Background

The model of 'progress' to be developed in this strategic national research project is one which will emphasise equitable and sustainable wellbeing, and reflect the best research and policy practice and the attitudes and priorities of the Australian community. The main components of the AP21C project will include: the development of key domains of progress, agreement on the most important themes and measures within each domain by a process combining community engagement and expert input, the establishment of appropriate progress indicators and indexes, the initiation of a university progress research network and the ongoing formulation of research analysis, submitted to Government and to influence the public policy debate.

AP21C has two major partners, VicHealth and the Australian National Development Index (ANDI).

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) works in partnership with organisations, communities and individuals to make health a central part of people's daily lives. The focus of VicHealth's work is on promoting good health and wellbeing, by enhancing community participation and reducing health inequalities. VicHealth has supported a wide range of community, state and national initiatives for better community progress and wellbeing measures over many years.

The Australian National Development Index (ANDI) is a national collaboration of 40 leading community organisations, church groups, businesses and universities which aim to introduce a holistic measure of progress – an index that reflects the views of Australians in an ongoing, participatory process. Informed by experts, but defined by Australians, ANDI will tell us in a snapshot, how we are doing as peoples, as communities and as a nation.

Supporting partners include the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), the Young & Well Collaborative Research Centre (YAW CRC), The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF).

Initial discussions outlining the AP21C recognised that 'the concept of progress requires multi-dimensional definition and measurement' (ACOLA, 2012²). Thus, the findings of this pilot community study should be viewed alongside the work undertaken elsewhere in regard to defining and measuring progress. Most notably, the ABS Measures of Australia's Progress (Cat 1370.0.00.002) (which was published after this research was conducted) will be used as a basis for comparing emerging themes from this pilot study and for the next stage of the pilot study (the online survey).

1.2. Aim and objectives

This first stage of the AP21C pilot was designed to explore – in a focus group setting - language, values, goals and priorities expressed by the focus group participants when they talk about national progress.

² ACOLA (2012). *Australia's Progress in the 21st Century: imagining... defining... measuring*. March 2012 V.06.

The specific objectives of these discussions were:

- To bring groups of people together to discuss what is important for them, and people like them, in assessing how well Australia is doing – and as such *begin* to engage the community with regard to views on progress, and to begin to understand how the general public talk about progress
- To encourage participants to discuss, debate and agree responses to questions such as:
 - What do we want for Australia's future – what kind of Australia do you want to live in?
 - What kind of society should we be leaving for future generations? What should it look like?
 - What defines community and society 'well-being'? What kinds of things are important?
 - How do we know if Australia is progressing as a society – what kinds of things should we be looking at or measuring?
- To begin to identify and define different areas or 'domains' that are important, and why they are important. In this respect, the purpose of these exploratory discussions was not to test existing domain structures (as could be derived from, for example, the related work being undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics³ or by ANDI)
- To identify the extent to which there are differences or similarities in these domains between different groups of people (defined for this pilot exercise by life-stage).

The results of the focus groups thus provide a genuine dialogue among community members about what is important for them in thinking about Australia's progress. The aim of this early pilot work - consistent with the overall research design framework agreed with the Project Working Group - was also to identify some *provisional* recommendations for domains to be included in ANDI, what these domains mean to the community. An additional aim was to gain an understanding of the language the community uses when talking about these issues (this is the subject of a separate report⁴).

The findings from these focus groups also informed the design and content of the second part of the pilot program - an online survey of 1,000 people from across Australia. This survey will provide quantitative information on progress priorities and values and inform the development of a draft index methodology and framework. It is worth noting at this point that the purpose of this pilot study was to commence with general and wide ranging conversations with participants to try and understand some of the underlying drivers, language, values and unprompted themes (as opposed to testing out a framework of values or domains). Thus, the qualitative study did not seek to build on existing domains, but rather to explore well-being and progress from an 'unprompted' community perspective. Interestingly, however, there is considerable alignment between the topics identified by community respondents in this research and the areas and themes identified in other research exploring progress. Table 1 provides an overview of the areas identified in some of the key related studies undertaken and maps the topics and issues which emerged from this research to those domain structures.

³ As part of the Measuring our Progress project, a consultation process was undertaken and reported in 'Aspirations for our Nation'. The report was published in November 2012 (after the completion of the fieldwork for this pilot study).

⁴ See *Communicating Effectively: ANDI Language Guide Draft 3 Feb 21st 2013*

Table 1 Comparison of themes in different initiatives examining progress (grouped into four domains for comparison purposes only)

		Society	Economy	Environment	Governance
Australian National Development Index (ANDI)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children and young people • Communities and regions • Culture, recreation and leisure • Education and creativity • Health • Indigenous well-being • Subjective well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic life and prosperity • Work and work life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment and sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democracy and governance • Justice and fairness
Australian Bureau of Statistics Measuring Australia's Progress		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health • Close relationships • Home • Safety • Learning and knowledge • Community connections and diversity • A fair go • Enriched lives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities • Jobs • Prosperity • A resilient economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy natural environment • Appreciating the environment • Protecting the environment • Sustaining the environment • Healthy built environment • Working together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust • Effective governance • Participation • Informed public debate • People's rights and responsibilities
Canadian Index of Well-being		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community vitality • Education • Healthy populations • Leisure and culture • Time use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratic engagement
OECD		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education and skills • Health • Housing • Personal security • Social connections • Subjective well-being • Work-life balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income and wealth • Jobs and earnings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic engagement and governance
The community consultation	ACOLA	<u>Community connections and diversity</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural diversity • Immigration <u>Close relationships</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social relationships and support networks <u>Home</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing <u>A fair go</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social welfare and social security • Transport <u>Enriched lives</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leisure and recreation 	<u>Opportunities</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment • Trade and industry <u>Prosperity</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wealth and materialism? <u>A resilient economy</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Banking and finance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protecting national resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance and the political system • Standards in public life • Policing • The justice system

Society	Economy	Environment	Governance
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work-life balance <p><u>Safety</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Neighbourhood and community safety• National security <p><u>Health</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health <p><u>Learning and Knowledge</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Education• Technology and information			

In considering other related research in this area, support and advice received from members of the Project Working Group, Project Review Group and the ABS has also been valuable and has helped to inform the structure of this report as well as being incorporated into the design of the next phase of online survey research.

A further objective of this qualitative research was to explore the effectiveness of the methodological approach to engaging with community members on issues relating to 'progress'. As such, some attention is given in the report as to the appropriateness of the methodology and the ability of community members to engage in a meaningful way in discussions about progress in Australia (see Section 8).

1.3. Report structure

The findings of this research are presented around four main domains: society, economy, environment and governance. These organising domains have been taken from the ABS Measures of Australia's Progress and provide a useful and complementary way of organising the data which emerged from the focus groups. However, it should be noted that these four overarching organising domains were applied to the data post hoc and were not used as a way of structuring the focus group discussions.

The report has therefore adopted the following structure:

- Society – cultural diversity, immigration, social relationships and support networks, housing, social welfare and social security, transport, leisure and recreation, work-life balance, neighbourhood and community safety, national security, health, education and technology and information (Section 4)
- Economy – employment, trade and industry, wealth and materialism, banking and finance (Section 5)
- Environment – protecting national resources(Section 6)
- Governance – governance and the political system, standards in public life, policing and the justice system (Section 7), and
- Reflections on the methodological aspects of the research (Section 8).

2. Methodology

The methodology was qualitative, delivered via focus groups which were moderated by a qualitative researcher from the Social Research Centre.

For this pilot phase, seven focus groups were held: four in Melbourne, two in Sydney and one in a regional Victorian town. The focus groups commenced on the 10th October and were completed by the 21st October 2012. The structure and composition of the groups is provided in Table 2.

Table 2 Structure and composition of the focus groups

Group type	Composition
Retired (VIC)	Retired people, age 60+ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Mix of males and females (unrelated) ◆ Mix of single and partnered ◆ Mixed socio-economic status
Families with children (NSW)	Adults aged 25-59 with dependent children: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Mix of males and females (unrelated) ◆ Some lone parents ◆ Parents of children (ranging from babies to teenagers) ◆ Mixed socio-economic status
Young adults no children (NSW)	Adults aged 19-29 with <u>no</u> dependent children: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Mix of males and females (unrelated) ◆ Mixed socio-economic status ◆ Mix of living circumstances (living alone, living with a partner, living with friends etc)
Working age no dependents (VIC)	Adults aged 30-59 with <u>no</u> dependent children: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Mix of males and females (unrelated) ◆ Mixed socio-economic status ◆ Mix of living circumstances (living alone, living with a partner, living with friends etc)
Health problems (VIC)	Working age (18-59) adults with a health problem/disability which limits their day to day activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Mix of males and females (unrelated) ◆ Mix of ages ◆ Mix of living circumstances (single, partnered, with/without children) ◆ Mixed socio-economic status ◆ Mix of severity of condition
CALD (VIC)	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), working age (18-59) adults <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Mix of males and females (unrelated) ◆ Mix of ages ◆ Mix of living circumstances (single, partnered, with/without children) ◆ Mixed socio-economic status ◆ Mix of first generation migrants, people for whom English is a second language, people who were born into a culture that is significantly different to the dominant Australian culture
Regional (VIC)	Adults (18+) living in regional Victoria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Mix of males and females (unrelated) ◆ Mix of ages ◆ Mix of living circumstances (single, partnered, with/without children) ◆ Mixed socio-economic status ◆ Mix of regional/rural locations, where possible, from across the area

2.1. Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted by a professional social research respondent recruitment agency. Following a full written briefing and discussions with the Social Research Centre, the agency used a screening questionnaire to ensure that an appropriate mix of respondents was recruited to the group. Respondents were recruited via a number of different sources, primarily using the recruiters' own databases, snowballing and direct approaches. The recruitment agency used is a specialist in the recruitment of respondents for social research and is AMSRS/AMSRO registered and certified with ISO20525 accreditation.

Whilst the sample was not designed to be representative in any statistical sense, the recruitment was tightly managed to ensure an appropriate mix of respondents within each group (see Section 2.4 for respondent profile). Participants were given an incentive according to current market rates (\$75).

2.2. Groups and facilities

Each focus group was conducted by an experienced moderator from the Social Research Centre. With the permission of participants research sessions were audio-recorded, and these recordings were transcribed for the purposes of analysis.

Melbourne groups were conducted at the Social Research Centre's purpose built focus group room and at a library on the outskirts of metropolitan Melbourne. The Sydney groups were conducted at a hotel venue in the North of Sydney. The regional focus group was conducted in a meeting room at a regional hotel.

2.3. Group discussions

A discussion guide (see Appendix 1) was developed in consultation with the ACOLA team, based on the objectives listed in Section 1.2, and after a detailed briefing on the background and purpose of the study. Participants were provided, in advance, with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 2) which explained the background and context to the research, and provided several questions to encourage them to start to think about the issues in advance of attending the group. At the commencement of each group, participants were asked whether they had considered the information provided in advance and whether they had any questions at that stage, before the discussion got underway. All respondents had read the information sheet so had some prior understanding of what the discussion was about.

2.4. Group structure and composition

Eight participants were recruited for each focus group. A total of 49 people participated in the focus groups - 25 females and 24 males (see Table 3). There were seven 'no-shows' across the whole of the groups (five of these were in the two Sydney groups). The oldest respondent was 69 and the youngest 20, with a full range of ages covered in between.

Table 3 Participant profile

Group	Attendees	Gender
Retired	8	4 females 4 males
Families with children	6	2 females 4 males
Young adults no children	5	4 females 1 male
Working age no dependents	7	3 females 4 males
Health problems	8	4 females 4 males
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)	7	4 females 3 males
Regional	8	4 females 4 males
Total	49	

2.5. Analysis and reporting

All discussions were digitally recorded (with consent) and the recordings were used for analysis purposes. The analysis was conducted using an analysis framework for the classification and interpretation of qualitative data. The key themes and topics were identified through the discussion guide and through an initial review of the qualitative data to develop an analysis coding structure. Sections of the recordings were then coded (using NVivo software for the management of qualitative data) to enable a thematic retrieval of data under each theme, or by group attributes (to allow, for example, comparison of responses to themes or questions by group). The use of this thematic data coding technique ensures that findings are directly traceable back to the raw data, thus providing a fully transparent analytical method.

Verbatim quotations from across the research have been included in this report to illustrate these findings. Where words are shown in square brackets [as such] this denotes the author's additional words, included to make a sentence clearer, and the use of ellipsis (...) indicates that some (non-relevant) text has been omitted. The source of the direct quotations follows each quote in round brackets, using the same labelling as shown in Table 3.

3. Identifying areas of importance

At the start of each focus group, respondents were asked to think about what were the ‘good’ things about Australia, or the things that they were most proud of when thinking about Australia. This enabled the emergence of ‘top-of-mind’ topics or issues. Respondents were then also asked about the things that were not so good, or things that they perhaps were not so proud of. The specific prompts from the moderator were:

- What are the good things about living in Australia today? What are you most proud of?, and
- What are the ‘not so good’ things about living in Australia today? What are you least proud of?

The information was recorded on a flip chart. This first part of the discussion was unprompted by the moderator, to enable the emergence of issues that were ‘top-of-mind’. Table 4 provides an indication of the *unprompted* coverage of the existing ANDI domains, as listed in the ANDI Business Prospectus, plus additional unprompted areas suggested by respondents.

As is evident, some existing ANDI domains did not get mentioned spontaneously by respondents. In particular, the two domains relating to population sub groups, children and young people and Indigenous Australians were not mentioned. This is more than likely due to these being population groups rather than issues or topics; hence they could cut across a number of different areas such as health and education.

The table also shows that some domains were more commonly raised in some groups than others. For example education, financial security (economic life and prosperity), democracy and governance, health and wellbeing, infrastructure, and work and life came up often, whereas recreation and leisure, technology and community well-being arose less often.

Table 4 Unprompted domain coverage

👍 = mentioned as a ‘positive’

👎 = mentioned as a ‘negative’

ANDI Domain List	Group 1 Retired	Group 2 Families	Group 3 Young Adults	Group 4 Working age no dependents	Group 5. Disability/ health problem	Group 6. CALD	Group 7. Regional
Community well-being		👍			👍	👍 👎	
Cultural diversity		👍		👍	👍 👎	👍 👎	
Democracy and governance	👍 👎		👍	👍 👎	👎	👍	👎
Education	👍 👎	👍 👎	👍	👍	👍 👎	👍	👍 👎
Environment and sustainability	👍			👍	👍	👍	
Financial security (economic life and prosperity)	👍	👎	👍	👍	👎	👍 👎	👎
Health and well-being		👍 👎		👍	👍	👍	👍 👎
Infrastructure (investment, traffic/transport, utilities)		👎		👎	👎	👍	👍 👎

ANDI Domain List	Group 1 Retired	Group 2 Families	Group 3 Young Adults	Group 4 Working age no dependents	Group 5. Disability/ health problem	Group 6. CALD	Group 7. Regional
Justice and fairness				👍	👎	👍	👎
Personal relationships (family and friends)					👍 👎		
Recreation and leisure time				👍	👍		👍
Safety and security	👍 👎		👍	👎	👍		
Technology and innovation					👎		👍 👎
Work and life (employment opportunities, work/life balance etc)	👎	👍	👎 👍		👎	👍 👎	
Children and young people							
Indigenous well-being							
Additional 'domains'							
Food/produce	👍			👍		👍	👍 👎
Climate				👍	👍		👍
Freedom	👍	👍	👍		👍		

Whilst this provides a relatively superficial indication of the importance of different domains (which may in part have been influenced by, for example topical or current media or news stories or a particular event at the time of the focus groups), it is somewhat helpful in understanding how topics or domains arise naturally among the different groups of respondents. That said, it should be noted that just because an issue or topic was not raised naturally, without being prompted, that it is not important. A good example of this is social relationships – this was not mentioned in any of the group discussions until prompting, when all groups agreed it was very important (but something that perhaps was taken as a ‘given’).

Once respondents had been given the opportunity to raise unprompted issues and areas, in response to questions about what is good and ‘not-so-good’ about Australia, the moderator then raised topics that had not been raised (again using the ANDI domain list as a prompt, as in column one of Table 4). This then opened up the discussion to wider topics.

For the purposes of presenting the findings in this report, and to allow alignment with other research conducted in the area of ‘progress’, the findings are grouped under ‘society’, ‘economy’, ‘environment’ and ‘governance’. For each topic a descriptive narrative is provided. This outlines - from a respondent perspective – what the area or topic means, why it is important and how well Australia is performing in relation to each issue. Based on the evidence from the focus groups key themes for each topic or area have been tentatively identified, that were evidently important for Australian society and progress, according to participants. These areas and themes have subsequently informed the next stage of testing, via the online survey. There is also potential for further exploration of these themes, through additional focused sessions (this ‘next step’ is discussed further in the final section of the report).

4. Discussing aspects of society

The following topics have been grouped (in no particular order) under the heading of 'society':

- Cultural diversity
- Immigration
- Social relationships and support networks
- Housing
- Social welfare and social security
- Transport
- Leisure and recreation
- Work-life balance
- Neighbourhood and community safety
- National security
- Health
- Education
- Technology and information, and
- Information and the media.

4.1. Cultural diversity

Perspectives

In all focus groups, the issue of cultural diversity was raised early on in the course of all of the discussions. This related to the recognition that Australia included many different groups and cultures, and that this was a valued part of Australian culture which in turn contributed to a vibrancy and rich diversity. When asked what cultural diversity could mean, a typical response was:

*Just the diverse broad range of people from all around the world, living together
(Working age, no dependents)*

The importance of different cultural groups living harmoniously was also commonly raised, along with a concern that some cultural minority groups made a greater contribution to Australian society than others. In particular concern was expressed (more notable in the New South Wales groups than in the Victoria groups) that some minority groups were less inclined to 'mix in' with others. Examples were given of communities that had not learnt to speak English, communities where fellow Australians could feel unwelcome or unsafe and communities who did not appear to want to embrace the Australian culture. However, notably there was a general reluctance to refer to any particular group or culture.

*...to be honest with you, people need to come here and be comfortable with the
Australian ethos and want to be able to make a contribution to Australia as a
society... it works both ways, the barriers need to be removed and they have to
have the motivation to want to make a contribution (Working age, no dependents)*

*I go there [suburb in NSW] and I don't feel like I'm in, I hate to say it but I don't feel
like I'm in Australia any more ... which is an awful feeling (Young Adults no
children)*

Tolerance was also a recurring theme when discussing cultural diversity. Most felt that Australia was a very tolerant country in accepting diversity and differences. That said, whilst 'tolerance' was commonly mentioned there was also a view that some groups' perceived unwillingness to 'integrate' could counterbalance this.

... those people from different backgrounds, they come here, they have ended up forming a society of themselves, rather than actually mixing with the native population (Young adults no children).

According to respondents in several of the groups, this cultural 'concentration' could lead people to be fearful of diversity and what it might bring.

I didn't feel comfortable there (Families with children)

We don't want to be like America with all the gangs everywhere (Health problems)

.. it's not a true example of cultural diversity because if a person of different ways is afraid to go in a society or area where the predominant population is of some other culture so maybe there isn't the real definition of being culturally diverse (Young adults no children)

So although there were many discussions about the positive aspects of having a rich and diverse culture, this was often qualified with an implicit or explicit negative. That said, respondents were sometimes uncomfortable talking about issues relating to cultural diversity, amid concerns that they might say something inappropriate or that was perceived to be discriminatory or racist. .

Respondent 1 ... always a little bit worried about bringing the topic up, talking about it, having an opinion about it

Moderator why?

Respondent 2 It's one of the ones you won't talk about

Respondent 3 people are so politically correct, to be OK with everything (Regional)

I don't like it when they are all in the same area – is that racist?... sometimes you just feel like you are outnumbered or you are in the minority, like I like multiculturalism but I don't like it sometimes I get a little bit scared (Working age, no dependents)

Furthermore, there was a frustration expressed in four of the groups (CALD, Families with children, Regional and Retired) that some groups have access to greater support and help than others, and that this was unfair.

I think that we should have an equal system, like a system that's equal for everyone and not determined by who you are, what race or culture you have, why do some people get more money than others and the access to everything should be the same (Regional)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Different groups living alongside one another peacefully, safely and securely
- Different communities all making a contribution to Australian society and recognising Australian norms (and the removal of barriers that might prevent them from doing so)
- There is an acceptance of different cultures, and tolerance between the different cultural groups

- That there is learning from different cultures and what that can bring to Australian society, and
- That all groups are able to access the same level of support, regardless of their background

4.2. Immigration

Perspectives

Across the groups, there were some candid views on immigration policy (although notably others were more taciturn, perhaps linked to some awkwardness and sensitivity around the subject, as noted in Section 4.2 above). The general consensus was that Australia's current immigration policy meant that people were being accepted into Australia with insufficient consideration about the contribution they may make to Australian society. The concern here appeared to be two-fold: firstly that new migrants would not be able to, or willing to, 'integrate' into the Australian culture which could bring difficulties with regard to social harmony (as noted earlier); and secondly that significant resources were needed to support these groups.

Respondent Sometimes I think we're getting to a point where we are being too open, and we need to start shutting it down in a few areas... because I think the openness is starting to get us into trouble

Moderator Can you give me an example?

Respondent .. I'm right into accepting people from other cultures It's starting to get out of control, and that worries me that in 20 years' time when my kids are growing up and looking for a house and things like that, it's going to be a really big struggle, because if we don't start putting a cut on it we're all going to be living on top of each other (Families with children)

The term 'integration' was commonly used in the groups when discussing immigration to Australia, which generally was translated into migrants 'fitting in' to Australia, its laws and its way of life.

I don't want cultures just to come here and have to change but I just want them to somehow integrate properly (Young adults no children)

One of the key issues around this sensitive subject appeared to be willingness and ability to learn to speak English.

I think there should be more pressure to learn the language (Health problems)

Respondent: that person can live here without speaking English

Moderator: so what's the implications of that?

Respondent: they're not adjusting to the Australian language and culture as well (CALD)

However, others recognised that Australia's immigration policy had made a big contribution to employment in some sectors of the economy, and this was viewed positively.

Respondent 1 They are probably driving half of our taxis, they are working and paying taxes... working at Coles...

Respondent 2 They are doing a job I need

Respondent 1 That's right, making a contribution, not on welfare.... Can you imagine if you took like all of the new Australians, took them out of the service industry, the country would fall apart, seriously

Respondent 3 yeah, the health system would collapse without foreign workers (Working age, no dependents).

Key Themes

The evidence suggests that the following are important for Australian society:

- Newcomers to Australia are appropriately supported to ensure that they are able to adapt to the Australian way of life, and
- The immigration policy is robust and fair, thus enabling new migrants to make an important contribution to Australian society.

4.3. Social relationships and support networks

Perspectives

The importance of personal and social relationships rarely came up unprompted in the discussions about Australia's future. This is understandable given the orientation of the questioning towards national issues and directing respondents to think about what they are the most / least proud of with respect to living in Australia.

Nevertheless, once prompted to think about those factors that contribute to quality of life the paramount importance given to family and friends became evident.

We've all got personal relationships with someone, haven't we (Families with children)

Family and friends are important ... that's where your society and stuff starts (Regional)

Respondents generally agreed that people were 'social' and valued relationships and communication with others. The general consensus was that Australia is a supportive and caring society and that people are willing to help each other out at an individual, community and country-wide level. Examples were given of community support groups to help those in need, as well as the country coming to the aid of communities affected by, for example, drought or flooding.

And I think that's one good thing about Australians, like if there's something to be done and someone needs a little helping hand, we just all get in, and we mightn't be able to do much but we seem to do what we can (Families with children)

Parents were, unsurprisingly, particularly vocal on the importance of social and family support.

I think it's important that we look after our families.... I think if people stopped caring and not wanting that, not giving a crap basically about others.... That's when the turmoil would start... I mean we're pretty lucky here in Australia (Families with children)

Some of the older respondents reflected on the apparent demise of neighbourhoods where everyone knew everyone else, and 'garden fence' conversations were commonplace. This was contrasted to the current day, where many did not know their neighbours.

In the olden days it used to be you'd chat to your neighbours over the fence, just 'hi, how are you?', there's none of that. They don't even look at you sometimes (Retired)

However, others talked about the benefits of social media in facilitating global and virtual communities, helping people to stay in touch with friends and families who did not live locally, and providing an easy way to communicate with peers. Thus, it would seem that the notion of 'community' has shifted from one of immediate proximity to one of virtual and global dimensions.

There were some factors which were felt to inhibit social relationships; these related to being 'wary', time pressures and, as noted above, changes in communication modes. In one group – young adults without children – being 'wary' was felt to influence whether or how people engage with their neighbours.

I think everyone's wary, all this stranger-danger, don't do this because this may happen, now everyone is just scared, I think everyone stays indoors Don't let their kids go out and play in the street (Young adults no children)

In other groups, generally being busy meant that people just had less time to foster relationships.

But because we're all busy working sometimes it [social relationships with family/friends] just doesn't happen... I just feel sometimes I think man you know I've got my own life now, I've got five kids I'm looking after... (Families with children)

Related to the above points about social interaction was the importance of interpersonal skills and how people communicate with one another. Some felt that these skills were in decline and wanted to see a future where people were more respectful and courteous of others.

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Social networks being valued, and hence supported
- Everyone having someone they can turn to or rely on if they need help or support
- Having a society that looks after families, the young and the older generations, and
- People care about each other and offer help when it's needed – at an individual level, community level and beyond.

4.4. Housing

Perspectives

Three main areas of discussion emerged in relation to housing: the quality (and affordability) of rented housing, having the opportunity to become a home owner, and homelessness.

Whilst most felt that housing generally was of acceptable quality, it was noted in the regional focus group that for public housing, there could be a long waiting list and perhaps the condition could be improved.

The biggest concern about housing, raised across the groups, was in relation to becoming a home owner. Younger respondents, and those with their own children, were concerned about their ability in the future to be able to buy their own home given the high cost of house purchase prices.

The cost of housing now is getting higher and higher. I know it's something I worry about for my child when she's 25 or whenever, trying to buy her first home (Families with children)

Homelessness, and the notion of 'voluntary' homelessness, was mentioned in two of the focus groups (Adults without children, and CALD), where there was a minority view that some might choose to be homeless, or might not take up the support that was available for those at risk of becoming homeless. However, others felt that involuntary homelessness occurred where there were other social problems such as alcohol and drug issues as well as mental health difficulties. Either way, it was felt that people should not become homeless in Australia, and that there is (and should be) a safety net in place to prevent this.

There's always support unless you want to be homeless yourself, I think

There's still people living on the streets whereas in Australia there shouldn't be cos everyone gets some form of payment (CALD)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests that the following are important for Australian society:

- Everyone has, or will have, the opportunity to become a home owner
- Support is in place to help those who are at risk of homelessness, or are homeless, and
- No-one should live in homes that are of sub-standard quality.

4.5. Social welfare and social security

Perspectives

Having a 'safety net' in place, to support those who were not able to support themselves or to help people in times of need or hardship, was discussed as being an important facet of Australian society, and an indication of the value placed on looking after the less fortunate.

Respondent 1: In Australia there is a lot of support [for people who are struggling] whereas a lot of other countries there's no support from the government

Moderator: and that's an important part of a progressive society?

Respondent 2 Yes, definitely (CALD)

When you're poor [in Australia] you don't have to be poor and on the street, you can just be normal (Young adults no children)

That said, however, as noted elsewhere in this report there was an underlying concern that the welfare support 'system' was at risk of misuse or abuse, that it was sometimes seen as a disincentive to work. As such, it was felt by some that this could encourage a society which relies on the State to look after vulnerable people rather than their families and their community.

There was a general concern that some social security and benefit payments were provided to those who were not most in need. Underlying the discussions here were implicit notions relating to 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients of social security support.

The problem is I think we spend money in the wrong places, in many cases I think they give money to people who don't really need it (Working age, no dependents)

I have no problem with people on disability and people who really need the support getting that support. But it's people who rot the system (Families with children).

Whilst there was no clear identification or consensus around who may be 'undeserving', there was occasional mention of families with a large number of children (migrants and lone parents were both mentioned). Concerns were also expressed that some, notably families with children, could be financially better off on social security benefits than they would be in work.

I don't know what it is but if you've got four or five kids you get a lot of money, you can't earn that money as an unskilled worker, anywhere. Not to mention the benefits as well, that can't be doing society any good (Retired).

A perceived disincentive of having a 'safety net' was discussed in one of the groups – families with children – in that because there was state help (for example, for elderly residents) families may be less inclined to 'look after their own'. A further point was raised in relation to the perceived 'fairness' of the support system, in that some groups are treated more favourably than others.

I think that we should have an equal system, like a system that's equal for everyone and not determined by who you are, or what race or culture you have, why do some people get more money than others? and the access to everything should be the same.... (Regional)

A wider issue related to social support was offering support to other countries in times of crisis (or indeed to parts of Australia after a natural disaster). This was seen as important, and reflected the generous nature of Australia.

We are a very generous country as well, when there are problems overseas our pockets may be deep, but we're able to reach the bottom of our pocket to help (Health problems).

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Providing help and protection to those who are most in need to ensure that basic needs are met
- Having a welfare safety net that does not provide a disincentive to work
- Having a welfare system and ethos that encourages self-sufficiency and independence rather than reliance, and
- Having a welfare system that is not open to exploitation or misuse.

4.6. Transport

Perspectives

Transport was seen as an essential component of Australia's infrastructure, particularly given the size of the country. Three main issues were raised in relation to transport – congestion, public transport and the development of road and travel systems. Congestion was felt to be considerable in metropolitan areas, with a detrimental effect on efficiency.

Respondent 1 I think congestion, that's a huge issue ...

Respondent 2 ... and all the population growth and the city growth and the roads

Respondent 1 Traffic congestion is frightening for the future

Moderator So would you, how would you judge how well a country is doing when you are thinking about roads?

Respondent 1 I think if it's an efficient system, so not taking a person a ridiculous amount of time to get from A to B, congestion all the time, I think if that was improved a bit, we would be an efficient country (Working age, no dependents)

Some discussion was held around travel networks and the extent to which they were able to cope with expanding urban development.

Yeah but as an infrastructure our urban spread is going way too fast and our road system is not keeping up, our road system should actually be in place before [the developments]... (Health problems)

There was also a view that more should be done to encourage people to use the most efficient mode of transport, which it was perceived would be primarily around (improved) public transport networks. However it was also recognised that for some it was necessary to drive (examples were given of living in regional areas, or being disabled).

There's a lot of people who don't need to drive, who drive (Working age, no dependents)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Congestion is managed effectively so that it does not have a detrimental effect on society's and individuals' well-being, and
- There is an efficient transport system which is well-managed and well planned to cope with demand now and in the future, so that people can get where they need to go to and from with relative ease.

4.7. Leisure and recreation activities

Perspectives

It was commonly accepted within the focus groups that Australian society embraces a wide range of recreational and leisure activities, including sports, the arts and culture as well as an outdoor 'way of life'. These opportunities, it was felt, were an important part of a good society with benefits that include increased opportunities to socialise, increased family time, better health and a general feeling of well-being.

[an important part of life]... you have a job, you can go out and spend some money with your friends and family and the opportunity to go out and do things just inexpensively down the park or at a sporting event, or something local, or in the city, or out to a restaurant or a BBQ, things like that (Working age, no dependents)

Participation in sports events was particularly said to bring a sense of national pride as something that 'does bring us together'.

Some noted that such activities could be expensive but again the value was often outweighed by any costs, and there were said to be plenty of activities which had little or no cost attached to them. The importance of 'downtime' in today's busy lives was emphasised across the groups.

Well if you don't have that downtime you're going to be stressed out... it's going to affect us in other ways, and our stress levels would go up (Families with children)

... people work so hard to create a lifestyle for themselves and then they can never enjoy it... because they're too busy maintaining their lifestyle, which they don't get to enjoy. It's stupid (Young adults no children)

Other perceived benefits related perhaps more intrinsically to a sense of belonging and harmonious well-being and as a way of drawing people (including young people) back into family life.

Well with the recreation we socialise more... the socialisation tends to knit us together as a group. People have sort of different outdoor clubs or whatever and they get together and the family gets involved and you're one big extended family ... each one would help each other out if they're in trouble so it expands on that (Health problems)

One of the frustrations felt by many in the groups was the lack of time to participate in leisure and recreation activities, despite placing a high value on them. This frustration centred around ever increasing working hours, and – for families – the need to juggle several jobs to cover costs such as childcare (this is discussed further below - Section 6.2 work/life balance).

I know people that are taking second and third jobs because they've got kids on the way, they have no time to relax, they go from one job to the next... just

because everything is getting so expensive and they've got to provide for whatever, I think that's [recreation and leisure] deteriorating (Young adults no children)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Opportunities for individuals, families and communities to participate in (affordable) recreation and leisure activities, and
- For individuals, families and communities to reap the benefits of such participation through reduced stress and strengthened families and communities.

4.8. Work-life balance

Perspectives

Discussions around recreation and leisure time inevitably overlapped with discussions about time use, and availability of 'free' time for those in work. As noted above, there was a general consensus that people's 'down-time' had reduced as they worked longer hours, extended working days and extended working weeks. This was seen as a negative aspect of today's society, influenced by three main factors: increased employer demands; rising costs of living; and greater materialistic demands.

Life has become too mechanical. It's just like get up, go to work, come back (Young Adults no children)

I think a lot of parents these days have to work long hours to financially support..... (Health problems)

You've just got to be wary of saying, company employees, I want you to work 60 hours otherwise you get the sack (Working age, no dependents)

Key Theme

The evidence suggests the following is important for Australian society:

- To have an acceptable balance between work time and non-work time.

4.9. Neighbourhood and community safety

Perspectives

The general consensus was that Australia is a 'safe' country – according to participants this meant that they generally felt safe and secure in their homes and out and about in their communities. Respondents often contrasted how safe a country Australia is compared to some other countries in the world, particularly those they might have visited or previously resided in. Related to feelings of safety were feeling 'free' to travel to different places without being at risk of personal attack.

Generally speaking I think that Australia is one of the safest countries in the world (CALD)

I actually think safety and security in this country is pretty good.... I think it's pretty good compared to some other countries ... although we still have high crime rates in different areas which could be better (Families with children)

As the quotation above indicates, there were concerns about personal safety in some particular areas or at night time. To some extent, this was as a result of two incidents occurring around the time of the

fieldwork which had attracted high levels of media attention and associated public concern – the first was the murder of a young woman at night time in the inner suburb streets of Melbourne and the second was weekend protests leading to some violence in Sydney, relating to religious tensions.

I suppose we can look at it as safety, I suppose when you go out. You know that's where everything normally happens, [when] you go out late at night. You're not safe, you feel something may happen and we've had a bit of that lately in New South Wales, and so has Melbourne, you know, like, what happened (Families with children)

Some also recognised that whilst they knew that Australia was a relative safe country, they still could feel personally unsafe at times, particularly in the evenings if they were travelling around alone – this was predominantly raised by female respondents.

I think everyone's wary (Young adults no children)

The importance of looking at the 'overall picture' was stressed in the groups, rather than isolated incidents. Crime statistics were discussed in one group, noting that most crimes in Australia were at least fairly stable, with some having decreased.

You've got to look at the overall picture and say well is Melbourne, or Australia a less safe country than it was five years ago, ten years ago. Statistics would say probably not. (Working age, no dependents)

In general safety and security was highlighted as an important part of societal well-being, and hence an area which should be included when looking at societal progress.

Theoretically you should be able to walk down the street anytime, a lot of places in the world you can't do that (Regional)

I think safety and security should be one of the basic critical aspects of measuring the country's progress (CALD)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Crime statics remain stable or decreases
- Australia remains a safe and secure country (in terms of personal risk and danger), and continues to be seen as such (in other words, that people 'feel' safe)
- There should not be any 'no go' areas that are perceived as unsafe, and
- There should be no times of day or night that are perceived as unsafe.

4.10. National security

Perspectives

In discussing issues related to safety and feeling safe, discussions of security as a nation were raised, and the country's ability to protect and defend itself.

Our safety around the country as far as our soldiers and our defence forces and things like that (Families with children)

Whilst feeling that there was not a worry or threat of war on Australian soil, there was also a view that Australia's defence forces were concentrated in defence activities overseas and that this was to the detriment of national defence.

You don't have to worry about war, you don't have to worry about violence (Retired)

Well they're not here fighting, they're fighting overseas (Regional)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following is important for Australian society:

- That Australia is in a strong position to be able to defend itself.

4.11. Health

Perspectives

Discussions of health were focused primarily on access - access to health care systems that were of a high standard. This emerged during the early (unprompted) discussions as a particularly positive aspect of Australian society. Access to good health care was viewed as a priority, and one which it was felt was generally adequately met.

Respondent 1 We take it [health care system] for granted

Respondent 2 Very accessible

Respondent 3 Universality

Respondent 1 the standards are high, I would be confident if I had any operation here (Working age, no dependents)

Being able to see a doctor and getting treatment were seen as an important part of a successful society.

Well it's important for society, so that everybody is given that right of the most important thing, your health (Working age, no dependents)

It's an established system compared to where I come from, if we get sick and you don't have money you can't afford a doctor, whereas here you have Medicare and you might have to wait a little bit longer but at least you get seen by a doctor (CALD)

A few issues were raised in relation to the cost, and long waiting lists for some health services. Nevertheless, the general agreement was that the current system was good, standards were high and it was accessible to all those who needed it.

I'd agree that it's relatively good. I think as Australians though we want it better (Families with children)

Discussions on the health of the nation were limited to cursory discussions around the importance of looking after one's own health, and taking some individual responsibility for staying healthy (for example, through an appropriately balanced diet), and for considering the needs of an ageing population (mentioned in the Retired group).

Health is very important. It also reflects upon the standards of living in society.... (Retired)

There were very limited discussions around health inequalities. However, in two of the groups it was noted that although considerable resources were being 'funnelled' into indigenous health there appeared to be little evidence to indicate that this had improved at all.

Respondent 1 The indigenous population in Australia, have they been looked after?

Moderator That's a good question that [x] has raised, what do others think?

Respondent 2 I'm not sure that it's transparent enough for me, sitting in my home.. to actually know what's going on

Respondent 3 Nothing much has changed (Retired)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- There are high standards within the health care system
- As a nation, people are able to, and encouraged to, take responsibility for their own health, and
- Everyone is able to access the health care they need, and has confidence in the standards of health care they receive.

4.12. Education

Perspectives

The education system in Australia was discussed as being good, of a high standard, available to everyone, and something that people felt proud of; its universality was also to be applauded.

Everyone has access to education (Working age, no dependents)

Australian education standards were thought to be good on a world-scale. This general positive view also extended to higher education, with universities at a world-class level. It was recognised in all of the groups that education was the cornerstone of much of Australian society, cutting across a number of areas discussed in the groups, such as health, employment, personal relationships and cultural diversity.

I think it all starts with education, I think kids from poor backgrounds that have a good education can do anything (Health problems)

Nevertheless, there were areas of education which it was felt could be improved. Notably, it was felt that there could be inconsistencies in standards between teachers, between schools and between states (as well as between state and private education). Some of the older respondents felt that education standards were slipping, with less emphasis being placed on, for example, mental arithmetic or financial literacy. Others perceived that teachers were under considerable pressure, exacerbated with the introduction of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN); some felt that teachers were also relatively poorly paid. As a result, it was said that fewer were entering the profession which they felt put a greater strain on the existing teaching workforce.

Furthermore, there was a perception that some communities and families did not place a particularly high priority on the value of education for their children and that as a result children were missing out on life opportunities.

Like in [x] and places like that and these uneducated children that have been born and they are three generations in Australia and they're the hoons and the ones that are carrying on. If they were educated properly and spoke properly and got good jobs you wouldn't see those kids (Health problems)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Education is of a high standard, available and accessible to all

- Teachers and schools are fully supported to be able to deliver a high standard of education regardless of where in Australia they are, and
- The value of education, and its role in helping young people to achieve, is fully recognized across society.

4.13. Technology and innovation

Perspectives

In terms of a priority for Australia's progress and development, technology was seen as central in many of the groups, particularly in relation to communication.

I always think technology, compared to other countries, look you want... it has to be important because you like to be equal with everyone else. Not only that, with communicating, we want to be on equal par with everyone so it has to be important (Families with children)

I think it's as important as transport (CALD)

Technology was an area in which respondents felt that Australia was not progressing as well as it should be; there was a perception that technology was more advanced in other countries. Particular reference was made to broadband and to communication systems, which were felt to be not keeping pace with other countries.

Even in some under-developed countries, their technology's far better than ours (CALD)

To any other country I've been to, even like developing countries, better communication systems than Australia (Families with children)

The high cost of technology was also reported as an issue. However, the need for large-scale investment was recognized if Australia was to compete in the global economy.

It [broadband] does have the potential to be pretty amazing, because essentially if everything is going online, that looks like the way it's going, in terms of trade and business and economics (Working age, no dependents)

An alternative perspective on technology was a concern among some (notably older respondents) that the pervasiveness of technology, in terms of how people communicate with each other, had the potential to erode some of the 'softer' and more traditional skills relating to, for example, writing and face-to-face conversation.

Respondent 1 It's very sad but I do think that because of the beauty of technology, it isolates people...

Respondent 2 Ok, it does

Respondent 1 ... it totally isolates people because while you're in that mode with your little instrument and whatever that may be, you're not talking to people and you're not seeing people (Health problems)

That said, others felt that whilst the nature of communication might be changing (through modes such as Facebook and other social media), people are still communicating and in some ways communication could be enhanced through technology, for instance strengthening communication over long distances and across countries.

We're still talking to each other...so I don't know if it's good or if it's bad, it's a bit tricky (Young adults, no children)

In the group of younger people, this changing communication was evident in relation to expectations about social communication.

I think that's probably why we don't know the names of our neighbours and we're not talking over the fence. If I get a knock on my door, well I'm sort of a bit annoyed that that person didn't text me first (laughter)... I find it weird when someone knocks on my door, I think, you know, I'm a bit offended, I don't want to open the door, like 'who is that?' (Young adults, no children)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- The pace of technological change is on a par with the rest of the world
- Everyone is able to access technology and the benefits it can bring, and
- Technology improves the way we communicate, rather than eroding it.

4.14. Information and the media

Perspectives

The plethora of information available to people these days was discussed, and was seen in both a positive and negative light. On the positive, it was recognised that people have a greater access to information through, for example, the internet, which in turn could bring about greater knowledge, and a greater awareness of issues that affect people's day-to-day lives.

If you bring it to people's minds, then that can bring about social change (Working age, no dependents)

However, on the negative side it was recognised that the media (in whatever form – print, TV, online) has immense power and that their reporting may not always be balanced, or robust.

Respondent 1 The media hype and everything else, you go back 20, 30 years and the news was reported like it happened, now the media is created

Respondent 2 they're not accountable

Respondent 1 ... they'll create something that's not there

Respondent 2 ... sensationalism (Health problems)

Nevertheless, having a free press was welcomed, and seen a positive aspect of Australian society, particularly in terms of being able to question accountability in public life or to raise awareness of public issues.

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Access to high quality independent media reporting, and
- Free press, and open access to public information.

5. Discussing aspects of the economy

The following topics have been grouped (in no particular order) under the heading of 'economy':

- Employment
- Trade and industry
- Wealth and materialism, and
- Banking and finance.

5.1. Employment

Perspectives

A strong view was evident in the groups that everyone who can work should be able to work, that there were plenty of opportunities for people to do so, and that people who work hard are rewarded in Australian society.

Whether it's work, or want to start a business or whatever that might be, there's a proper system in there for that, if you are keen, if you are putting in the hard yards, there's no way to stop you (CALD)

I feel there's ... in Australia you do have a lot of opportunities if you want to work hard... (Families with children)

Providing employment opportunities for all was seen as an important part of a progressive society. This extended to those who perhaps may not be able to compete in the primary labour market (such as some disabled people) but were still able to make a contribution in some way.

Respondent 1 If you're able to work at a certain age you should be working. Because it builds confidence, it builds character and all sorts of things

Respondent 2 It comes back to our values (Families with children)

We should all contribute what way we can, whether it's volunteering in an op shop or whatever, or helping out at school (Health problems)

According to respondents, it was also important that people were better off financially in work than they would be out of work and on benefits – there was a perception that currently this was not always the case.

There's still a lot of people that won't go out and look for a job even though they're able to because of the Centrelink money that they'll miss out on. It's not worth it for them to work (Health problems)

Respondent 1 I think everybody who can work, should work

Moderator and do you think that is the case?

Respondent 1 By and large

Respondent 2 there's probably different pockets that.. the young girls getting pregnant and not wanting to work (Working age, no dependents)

Yeah they say, 'oh we'll get these young mums back to work', well make it affordable too (Regional)

The ones who are working are overtaxed and the ones who are not working are getting all the benefits (Retired)

Related to employment opportunities was a concern about the erosion of skills required for manual and blue-collar occupations. In a few of the groups, mention was made of a decline in training opportunities (for example, apprenticeships and the trade school system) in Australia and an associated influx of skilled manual workers from overseas (who were said to demand lower wages) to fill vacancies. Particular reference was made here to the mining industry.

Respondent 1 ... and touching on that, they're bringing people from overseas to do jobs

Respondent 2 which isn't right, they should be training people to do those jobs (Regional)

The need for a greater responsibility on employers to train staff was mentioned, perhaps with financial support from government.

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- That there is not a poverty trap or benefits trap whereby people are financially better off on benefit payments than they would be in paid work
- There are employment opportunities and choices for everyone who can work, and that there is the opportunity to progress and to be appropriately rewarded
- Everyone contributes to the economy in some way, and
- People are encouraged to pursue their employment aspirations.

5.2. Trade and industry

Perspectives

Discussions around trade and industry focused on three key areas: over-reliance on mining, competition and overseas trade.

There was a concern that the economy was over-reliant on the mining industry which it was felt may not be sustainable in the longer term if resources dwindle. A related point was raised about overseas workers who come to work in the mines, and what would happen to them if the mining sector diminished.

So what is our domestic investment for, to create the opportunity of a job for everybody, I cannot see that, there is no metal.... The mining industry maybe last another 20 years.... (CALD)

At the moment we are actually basing the Australian dollar on mining, you know, nothing else, it's just mining.... I think it'd be nice in the future if we actually could have more industry not based on mining (Health Problems)

In a number of groups, a strong concern was also expressed about land being sold to overseas interests (notably, to China).

Respondent 1 I think a lot of people, including myself, are very concerned that the Australian government is actually selling off Australia...

Respondent 2 oh yeah, you're dead right

Respondent 3 Yes, that's true (Health Problems)

And we've sold off so much anyway, so much of Australia's been sold off... we don't own a lot (Regional)

Where's all our assets here? We're losing all of our assets (Retired)

Discussions about overseas trade were also common, particularly in terms of reducing the cost of goods, and how this created a tension in buying Australian-made products (which was generally agreed as important for the Australian economy) and buying goods that offered the best value for money (ie, overseas imports) because they were cheaper. This was particularly mentioned in discussions around food.

Australians shop with their pocket, not with their morals. And the supermarkets are just a case in point, people just buy the cheaper imported homebrands (Retired)

Respondent 1 I'd like to keep our money here

Respondent 2 I don't think we support our own enough

Respondent 3 Yeah, I 100% agree with that (Families with children)

With regard to fresh produce, I would like to see more Buy Australia promoted, I try to go out of my way to buy Australian products and we used to promote that a lot more than we do now (Working age, no dependents)

An over-reliance on overseas imports and overseas economies was also mentioned.

Yeah it's more about, rather than being self-reliant we are more dependent on the economy of other Western nations.... So it's an indirect link, so if they fall we fall, if they grow we grow (Young adults no children)

Perceived lack of competition in some sectors was also raised (for example, food and retail); lack of competition was identified as hindering competition and leading to higher prices..

One thing I would do to improve Australia...the decline in labour productivity in Australia, would be to improve the overall barriers to competition. There's too many monopolizing retailers (Working age, no dependents)

Related to this was a view that the public sector was not as efficient as the private sector in delivering services.

But when you see people standing [referring to road workers], they're government, when you see them working, they're privatised, you know (Regional).

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- Australia has a largely self-sufficient economy that is not overly reliant on overseas imports or overseas economies
- There is an appropriate level of competition, with an appropriate private/public sector mix, to ensure that the economy is efficient
- The country takes a long-term view in regard to the sustainability of the mining industry and alternatives in the future, and
- A priority is placed on access to affordable high-quality Australian-made goods and produce.

5.3. Wealth and materialism

Perspectives

A buoyant economy in Australia with an associated good standard of living was a common thread throughout the discussions. However, notably the issue of materialism was also raised in some of the groups.

Respondent 1 But sometimes I get a bit disappointed with our country, I kind of feel like we are becoming more materialistic, I don't know if other people feel that? Housing, obesity, you know, people's houses, it's all the bling, the lifestyle bling, the houses are bigger than what we used to have, it's the unnecessary big sized cars... I just wonder if many people aren't kind of more focused on things than important things, like personal relationships, family and friends

Respondent 2 I see that as progress... it's material, but just as a society you know, you move onto bigger and better things and your castles are bigger (Working age, no dependents)

It's probably a two-fold problem because for one thing prices of homes are so incredibly high and cars and so on, but also the fact that there's this assumption that you have to have all this material stuff ... the financial burden, or perceived financial burden, is huge.... (Health Problems)

The reported implication of this apparent relentless pressure to achieve more and acquire more was that people were compelled to work longer and harder, sometimes juggling a number of jobs or with two parents working virtually 'around the clock' to make ends meet, or having less time to spend with family. Relatedly, there was also mention of it making for a 'selfish nation'. However, others felt much of this was down to personal choice (which is in part related to the notion of 'freedom' as discussed in Section 9.1).

It's all choice. We are not robots, we are not in communist China, you can do what you want (Working age, no dependents)

That's the difference between well-being and being well-off. So right now we are striving for being well-off rather than looking towards well-being (Young Adults no children)

Associated with this was an observation that the cost of living was relatively high, and seemed to be increasing. This, along with apparent pressures to have more (and to have more 'now'), and to do more, was felt to place some families with financial constraints. For families, the apparent high cost of childcare was an added pressure (both financially and otherwise).

The access to it and the price of it, adds to I think the leisure time and the relaxation time because when dad's at work mum's at home with the kids and when dad comes home, mum goes to work... because they just can't afford childcare or they can't get the spots for it (Families with children)

Tax relief for families was mooted among some as a way of easing some of these pressures.

You put that money back into every families' pockets then they can afford to pay their health insurance and they can afford to pay a lot of other things... better choices of food, therefore your health goes up... it all stems from one system and that is money... the living costs have to be done (Health problems)

The importance of wealth equalities and wealth distribution was also raised in some groups.

Respondent 1 Redistribution of wealth.... The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer

Respondent 2 but what I'd be saying though if we wanted to measure something we want to look at the gap and that the gap between the rich and poor is not getting bigger (Health Problems)

We have poor people that can access services and things like that, but they will bring up poor children, and that's what will flow down.. it's not progress (Regional)

I think we need to become a more level society, we used to have a very much bigger middle class, and less at the top and less at the bottom, that has blown out, there's a lot less in the middle and there's a lot less on both ends, so that society is dividing... we should be reversing that and becoming a greater middle class (Retired).

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- People being able to maintain a good standard of living, but ensuring that materialism does not come to dominate our society
- The cost of living is managed so that everyone is able to afford the things that they need to have an acceptable standard of living and quality of life, and
- The gap between the well-off and less well-off does not significantly increase.

5.4. Banking and finance

Perspectives

The stability of the financial sector was discussed in two of the groups, insofar as the banking system was viewed as relatively stable (comparisons were made with the United States) and safe. However, having a strong government which was able to exert appropriate pressure onto the banking system and sector to ensure their operations were fully aligned with the government's was also mentioned (for example, so that if the reserve bank's interest rate changed, the banks followed suit).

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- A safe, secure, efficient and transparent financial sector, and
- Accountability and responsiveness (to the government and the economy) in the banking sector.

6. Discussing aspects of the environment

The focus of discussions about the environment in the groups was on protecting Australia's natural resources.

Perspectives

Positive views of the environment - nature, wildlife, green space, clean air, clean water - arose in all of the discussions, particularly the benefits it brought in relation to quality of life, recreation, access to nature and the general outdoors.

I think we have relatively clean living as well, I think generally our suburbs are very picturesque and clean compared to a lot of countries that seem to be cluttered, so we have a great urban spread and, you know, being able to get some quality land and quality parks (Health problems)

Preserving the environment was seen as important (including managing the mining of natural resources, as noted earlier). In particular, managing urban development and the built environment was seen as a priority. Greater investment in solar energy was given as an example, as well as better urban planning to ensure that green wedges were not eroded, and a greater emphasis on the preservation of water.

I'd stop the urban sprawl and keep all the green wedges and the parks and the beaches and the gardens, because people need that psychologically for good health and happiness (Retired).

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- The preservation of the natural environment to ensure continued access to clean air, clean water, green space and nature, and
- Managed growth (in the built environment) that works in harmony with the environment.

7. Discussing aspects of governance

The following topics have been grouped (in no particular order) under the heading of 'governance':

- Governance and the political system
- Standards in public life
- Policing, and
- The justice system.

7.1. Governance and the political system

Perspectives

Australia's democratic political system and free elections (including compulsory voting) were viewed in a positive light by respondents

*One thing I'm quite proud of is our democracy, the robustness of our institutions
(Working age, no dependents)*

Respondent 1 I think the fact that we have to vote is not a burden...

Respondent 2 It's an honour

Respondent 1 ... and it is a privilege (Health problems)

*We probably have the best political system, I think, in the sense that whatever government you've got, you've got the opportunity to get rid of them, and you're not dictated to by a dictator that's got an army behind them, there's a lot of countries in the world like that ... and you're allowed to talk about it openly too
(Retired)*

Perhaps inevitably in any discussion around politics and governance, respondents were also quick to criticise the Australian government and politicians. The negativity was generally around perceived renegeing on pre-election promises (such as carbon tax and teacher's pay) as well as accountability (including financial accountability) and the perceived lack of robustness of some of the decision-making. There was some discussion about populist policy-making, about 'squabbling' between politicians and about apparent tensions between policy-making and governance at a federal, state and local level.

I think the federal government blames the state government and the state blames the local, and the local, go, everyone blames everyone (Regional)

The political freedoms and liberties enjoyed by Australians were highly regarded with a high value placed on the freedom within Australia to be what one wants to be, to achieve what one wants to achieve, to speak openly and to travel freely.

Yeah [in Australia] it's choice in the sense of, like, well anyone can do whatever they want (Working age, no dependents)

Yeah I think the freedom side of things is probably the one that we think about our country (Health problems)

Freedom of movement, you can move anywhere, go anywhere (Retired)

What I've found the best here is that like it's the freedom that you get here, like you do whatever you want ... but we don't actively think about that, we just take it for granted (Young Adults no children)

As long as we abide by the rules we've got freedom (Young Adults no children)

Freedom of speech You can get killed in other countries for saying what you can, what you believe (CALD)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- That all those who are eligible to vote do so, to take individual responsibility for the nation's governance
- That the people of Australia have freedom to choose what they want to do, to be who they want to be, to speak freely, to vote freely and to travel freely, and
- That politicians, and those who represent them, are trusted to do the best they can for the country.

7.2. Standards in public life

Perspectives

Again, it is unsurprising that when considering issues relating to governance that criticisms emerged about standards in public life, with a natural inclination to focus more on the negatives than the positives. Such criticism in the groups was often in relation to named public servants or politicians, but also in relation to a general view that standards in public life are sometimes affected by corruption, by greed and by the apparent increasing importance of personality over substance.

The government of the day and the government in the last probably decade are more worried about personalities rather than governing the country. All it is, is just him saying to her, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards (Health problems)

Transparency in decision making in the public sector was also raised, particularly in relation to large-scale investment or infrastructure projects (examples were given of transport and broadband). The concern was primarily around expenditure and associated financial accountability.

If the government does that it costs five times the amount if I did it, and it's just no financial accountability (Regional)

With all the big ticket items that the government spends money on, like the broadband or the transport or whatever, I often wonder if they shop around as much as we do at our level, when we shop around for a mobile phone or a car or whatever, does the government shop around properly? (Working age, no dependents)

Being more open and transparent in relation to how taxpayers' money is spent, and how decisions are made, was discussed as important.

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- That the standards in public life are based on principles of good governance

- That there is openness and transparency around decision-making in government, particularly when it involves large-scale expenditure of public funds, and
- That the public have confidence in standards.

7.3. Policing

Perspectives

There were two elements discussed related to policing: the first concerned policing and community safety (considered important for personal well-being) and the second related to detection of crime (perhaps considered more important in relation to society as a whole). Thus, views were mixed about policing and how this related to Australian society and progress. Whilst some thought that policing in Australia was ‘pretty good’, some also felt that the police were under-resourced, spent disproportionate time on traffic-related activities and administrative bureaucracy, and had insufficient powers (in part, it was felt here that policing was often ‘let down’ by the judiciary system – see Section 7.4). In the main, however, the feeling that the police force was under-resourced appeared to be influenced by personal or individual experiences (for example, delays in police attending to an incident of theft or burglary).

Like you call them because somebody’s vandalised your car, you know, it takes them 48 hours to turn up (Families with children)

Police are too busy with traffic (Regional)

That said, it was recognised that there was a potential risk in, for example, increasing police presence or increasing policing powers. The concern among respondents was that a greater police presence indicated an increase in risk, or an undesirable ‘police state’ which it was perceived could then enable the police to exert unnecessary levels of control.

Respondent 1 More powers, yeah, that’s what I think

Respondent 2 I think that could be dangerous Yeah because the wrong people get that power and they wreck it (Young adults no children)

You’ve got to be a little bit careful because it can go the other way, it can become a police state (Retired)

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- The police are sufficiently resourced, and
- The Police are able to operate effectively with appropriate levels of control and authority.

7.4. The justice system

Perspectives

The rule of law was discussed as an important element of Australian society – that there is a system of laws, checks and balances with a transparent process that has fairness as its objective. Having access to a High Court, having juries made up of members of the community and having a system that was protected against influence and bribery (as was reported not to be the case in some other countries) were all said to be important facets of the Australian legal system.

Respondent 1 The law is more for everybody in this country, it's not according to your position of responsibility of where you think you are in society...

Respondent 2 We have a system of checks and balances

Moderator So it's fair?

Respondent 1 By and large

Respondent 2 We don't have this centralised power system.... It can go to the High Court and it can be overruled so power is dispersed through the system and there are checks and balances that help to avoid abuses of power (Working age, no dependents)

It's also about the fairness of the law itself (Retired)

That said, there was a view that the justice system itself was becoming 'weak', or at best in need of strengthening. Others were also concerned that respect for 'the law' was decreasing (this issue of lack of respect was also mentioned in relation to policing). As noted earlier, there was a view that the justice system could 'let down' the policing system (for example, because of a perception that there were too many 'loopholes' or technicalities which resulted in cases being dismissed or deferred).

Parents are getting charged for trying to discipline their child, so I think our justice system is all really out of whack, actually I don't think we're progressing, as far as that goes (Families with children)

This related primarily to a view that 'punishment' was often not sufficiently punitive in relation to the crime, that the system was too lenient and that there was a need for harsher penalties for more severe crimes. In one group (Regional) there was a general consensus in support of capital punishment (although this was not mentioned in any of the other groups).

Conversely, it was also mentioned that it was costly to put people in jail and it was not necessary rehabilitative.

I think there has to be a better program 'cos some people are going to jail where they actually need a program, they can actually benefit society better by having a structured program such as volunteering or something to help them... whereas some people that belong in jail, like drunk drivers repetitively, belong in jail, they're a danger to society (Health problems)

It [prison] just makes people worse, it hasn't worked since its inception, being locked up (Families with children)

Media portrayal of justice was evidently influential – many of the examples and scenarios discussed by respondents appeared to be influenced by stories reported in the media and on hearsay about, for instance, ex-prisoners being prioritised for public housing and being able to access free higher education whilst in jail.

Key Themes

The evidence suggests the following are important for Australian society:

- The legal system that is fair, and transparent, with a level playing field for everyone
- There is sufficient opportunity to rehabilitate offenders and to enable them to subsequently make a valuable contribution to society, and

- That appropriately punitive measures exist for serious crimes but that the justice system strikes a balance between punishment and rehabilitation.

8. Reflection on the Methodological aspects of the research

The task of this pilot phase was to explore community perceptions as to what progress looks like. As noted earlier, the initial phase of each discussion group was unprompted, allowing themes to emerge naturally from participants in response to broad questions such as 'what do you want for Australia's future? What should our society look like? And how will we know if we are progressing? The purpose of the pilot study was not to compare or mirror existing domains, or to suggest new or replacement ones. That said, these results show considerable overlap with other work in this area (as identified in Table 1) in terms of the domains that were identified. However, for some domains respondents had a lengthy discussion (immigration and cultural diversity are good examples here) whilst others were only discussed briefly or at a relatively superficial level. This was often a reflection of both the salience of the topics or 'domain' within the groups at that time, as well as the time limitations of each group (each group was 90 minutes long), which prohibited lengthy discussion of each issue.

This section reflects on the following:

- The focus group methodology
- Group structure and composition
- Conducting the discussions.

The section then provides an outline of the next stage of the research – the online survey, and provides a rationale and some recommendations for subsequent qualitative consultations.

8.1. Using a focus group methodology to understand how people talk about 'progress' in Australia

The project aims for this pilot qualitative phase were to commence discussions with members of the public on matters relating to progress in Australia - underlying assumptions, drivers and values relating to identified areas of progress. As a first stage in the research process, it was agreed with ACOLA that it was important to first understand what was important and why, and what kinds of language and conversations people have around progress – rather than commence the groups with a pre-determined list of domains or topics. Although the ANDI list of domains was used as a prompt, this was to guide the discussions only (and was only introduced after participants had spent some time raising their own topics or issues that they thought were important in thinking about Australian's progress) rather than to pre-empt the identification of areas of importance.

The purpose of this pilot exploratory stage was to scope what is important to members of the Australian community in terms of measuring Australia's progress. In doing so, the groups began with needing to identify what they thought was important in Australian society, and how Australia is faring on these issues of importance. Thus the discussion explored language, values, goals and priorities as well as going some way in attempting to identify areas for measuring progress. In terms of discussion, consideration of a range of views and coming to a consensus, a focus group methodology is effective as it enables different perspectives to emerge and be discussed in the group, which then in turn informs others' thoughts. New ideas are often triggered as people think and reflect on others' points of view, and refine their own perspectives accordingly, and this process was indeed evident in the groups conducted.

Respondents were encouraged to think about the issues before they came to the groups (and were provided with a Participant Information Sheet to help facilitate this process). However, it was apparent that a focus group of 1.5 hours was insufficient time to identify and 'unpack' the areas that people felt were important, and then to consider progress and possible measurement of such areas. Indeed, the coverage of topics in the groups was vast – 23 different topics have been reported here. In reality, this meant that in the groups there was often insufficient time to reflect on what each of these meant to people, why it was important, and what their 'vision' might be in terms of aspirations on a particular

topic or theme. As a result, some topics received only a cursory discussion, acknowledging their importance in society but with insufficient depth of discussion to really understand the rationale, or a gain a deep insight into the values or vision that contributed to identifying a theme or issue as an important goal for the future. However, just because some issues were discussed in more detail than others, it does not necessarily mean that those that attracted less attention are of less weight – the feeling was that some topics were just harder to discuss, complex, or people needed more information or to give more consideration to those topics. Examples here may include the environment, domestic violence, and the well-being of children, young people and indigenous groups.

It was also evident in the groups that some people found it very difficult, conceptually, to think about progress and measurement. The complementary language study undertaken to analyse the language used by participants in the groups (ANDI Language Guide, 2013) noted that respondents felt '*distant from language like index, measurement and indicators, or domains of progress*' (p1) and as such these concepts were difficult to talk about. Respondents found it relatively easy to talk about what they perceived was 'good' about Australia and what could be improved, but encouraging them to talk about these issues and how they might look in the future (that is, how would we know if we are making progress in these areas) was more challenging and required considerable prompting by the facilitator. As noted in the complementary language study, people were more comfortable talking about how a government or policy affected them personally but were '*less used to talking broadly about the status and direction of the country*' (ibid). Respondents often needed repeated steering away from what was important to them, as individuals, to be thinking more widely about communities and society.

In some cases, respondents felt that they did not have enough knowledge to be able to make a full contribution. So for example, discussions on democracy, governance, policing, immigration and so forth sometimes seemed to be based on inaccurate information or hearsay, which could then influence the rest of the discussion. Because of time constraints this sometimes meant that complex subjects or topics did not receive the full discussion they clearly required. An example here is whether increased police presence was an indicator of progress or not – further time was needed to think through the implications of this, and to consider both sides of the discussion before coming to a conclusion or some form of consensus.

Furthermore, it was also apparent that respondents sometimes felt awkward discussing some topics and worried that they would say something controversial or inappropriate. This was evident in discussions around ethnicity, immigration and communities living harmoniously but also around topics related to, for example, welfare dependency, and the health and well-being of disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

8.2. Group structure and composition

As described in Table 2, the seven focus groups covered the following 'life stages':

- Retired
- Families with dependent children
- Young adults (under 30) without children
- Working age adults (30+) without dependents
- People with a health or disability that affected their day to day activities
- People from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, and
- People living in a regional area.

There was a need to ensure that the groups were as reflective of the diversity of the community as far as is possible within the limitations of seven focus groups. This was achieved through careful recruitment to ensure, for example, representation of different age groups, socio-economic

backgrounds and household types within each group, as well as a 50/50 gender split. Reflecting on this approach, it is evident that bringing people together who have a life stage commonality works well, insofar as there is a shared experience. Whilst seven groups is a relatively small number of groups for a qualitative study, it is adequate for a study that is seeking to *start* to understand language, concepts and conversations about progress, and to identify the kinds of areas, themes or 'domains' that might be important to people when looking to identify and measure progress. It should be remembered that this is a pilot study, and as such the results are not designed to be definitive (for example, in providing clear statements on domains), but to help to inform the subsequent stages of the research, ensuring that each stage is built on what has been learnt thus far.

However, it was notable in some groups that there were gender differences, both in terms of general participation in the discussion, as well as in perspectives about what is important. Due to the constraints of a focus group, and the time available, it was not possible to fully explore these differences, suffice to say that they were present. For future research running groups separately with males and females would help to fully draw out such differences and similarities.

One of the objectives of this pilot focus group stage was also to identify the extent to which there are differences or similarities in these domains between different groups of people (defined for this pilot exercise by life-stage). However, this proved to be difficult to determine with only one focus group per life stage; the online survey should enable a more robust comparison between such groups.

8.3. Conducting the discussions

The use of a Participant Information Sheet ensured that respondents had considered the topic prior to attending the discussion, and had an understanding of what the research was about (rather than coming to it 'cold'). As noted, respondents were easily able to identify what was working well in Australian society (for them) and what was not. However, as noted earlier respondents often did find it difficult to look *forward* with regard to the kind of country they would like Australia to be, what their aspirations were and what kind of values they thought should guide Australia in the future. Respondents needed to repeatedly be brought back to the notion of identifying priorities, goals and aspirations, and often found it very difficult to articulate a future vision without considerable prompting (or even, leading) from the moderator. Some direct extracts of the discussions, which illustrate this point, are provided below.

Moderator So the legal system then as a country that's progressing, the legal system needs to be what?.....[long pause] fair?

Respondent 1 fair

Respondent 2 yeah

Respondent 3 fair

It was also apparent that participants often found it inordinately difficult to articulate conceptually what they meant. The focus group environment, and the number of topics to explore, meant that there was often insufficient time to fully probe and explore with individual respondents what they meant by certain statements without alienating other members of the group, or making that individual feel 'targeted' or under pressure to give a more coherent response. An example is provided below.

Respondent And from, you know, like, our safety around the country as far as our soldiers, and your defence forces and things like that

Moderator Ok mm, so feeling safe on a national level?

Respondent mm (families with kids)

Moderator What does a 'safer society' mean?

Respondent when you're going out at night and you don't really like to be on your own

On occasion, there was also evidence of 'groupthink', whereby group members have appeared to reach a rapid consensus view on something without sufficient thought of different viewpoints. In some cases group members were able to challenge each other (for example, on immigration policy) but other times the group simply appeared to agree with one another (despite attempts from the interviewer to probe for an alternative perspective). A good example of this is the view (in the regional group) that capital punishment should be reintroduced (as reported in Section 8.2).

Respondent 1 You should bring back hanging

Respondent 2 yeah, bring back hanging... you should lose your own life

Respondent 1 why should you be a burden on society, why would you go into jail for 18 years or whatever and then all our taxes pay for ...

Respondent 3 .. their education

Moderator if we're talking about how we're progressing as a country would that be progress, to introduce or reintroduce the death penalty?

Respondent 3 Yes

Respondent 1 Yeah

Respondent 2 Yes

Respondent 4 It would, but I'd like a bit of constraint on it (Regional group)

In summary, the following should be considered:

- The need for domain-specific focus groups, where respondents' discussions are focused on one area (for example, the economy, cultural diversity, health etc) which allows in-depth discussion and consensus building on a specific theme rather than coverage of all domains and sub-domains within a group
- Consideration of holding gender-specific groups as well as life-stage groups, and
- Validation groups, to further refine and 'test' out the aspirations and visions that have been developed from the evidence that emerged from this stage of the research.

These points are discussed further in Section 8.5.

8.4. Next steps – the online research

The results of the focus groups directly informed the areas to further explore (in terms of importance and associated progress) in the online survey. The survey questions have also been informed by other studies around the measurement of progress (including the ABS's Measuring Australia's Progress initiative and the existing ANDI work on identifying domains).

Findings from the groups and the online survey will then inform the domains to be included in ANDI, highlighting particularly issues around priorities. However, it remains that at least some topics will warrant further, more in-depth discussion (see Section 8.5 below).

The next phase of the research, the online community survey, will also provide more detailed information on the appropriateness, relevance and prioritisation of the different domains and issues.

8.5. Next steps –further qualitative research

A large range of topics was discussed in each focus group – up to 23 different ones. In order to fully and more directly explore people's attitudes, values and beliefs around these different topics, we

suggest that any further qualitative research should adopt a focused and iterative approach which is informed both by the findings of these early focus groups as well as results from the online survey.

The best way of doing this would be, we suggest, further topic or 'domain' focused group discussions, so for example the complex issue of cultural diversity, immigration and cohesion is discussed in a themed group on society, employment and the economy in another one, and so forth. We recommend that focus groups remain structured around life-stage, but with separate groups for men and women. Respondents would be advised of the topic area they are to discuss, and will be provided with a 'fact sheet' in advance (and a short presentation at the start of the group). Suggested focus group structure and composition is outlined in Table 5. We have also proposed a final 'checkback' and negotiation phase. This provides an opportunity to validate the findings from the groups by presenting them back to members of the community to seek consensual validation (or amendment). This stage could also be used to negotiate out any particular differences in findings between the different groups through a consensual negotiation process. This approach has been used successfully in other large scale qualitative work, such as Developing Budget Standards in the UK⁵.

Table 5 Suggested future qualitative research program

Group type	Topic 1 (society*)	Topic 2 (Economy)	Topic 3 and 4 combined** (Environment and Governance)
Retired males	2	1	1
Retired females	2	1	1
Families with children - males	2	1	1
Families with children - females	2	1	1
Young females no children	2	1	1
Young males no children	2	1	1
Older working age males no dependents	2	1	1
Older working age males no dependents	2	1	1
Health problems female (working age)	2	1	1
Health problems male (working age)	2	1	1
CALD female	2	1	1
CALD male	2	1	1
Checkback/negotiation groups (half metro, half regional/rural)	4	2	2
Total	28	14	14

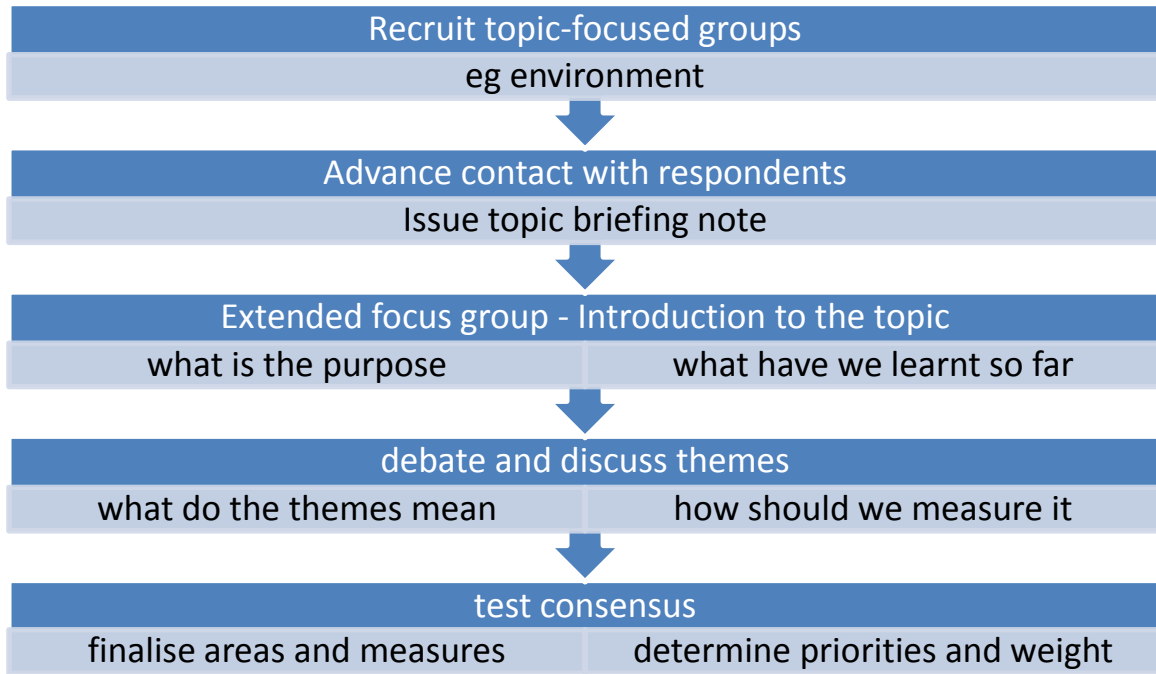
* at least two groups required due to large number of topics in this area – suggested split into 'communities, families and relationships' and 'wider society'

** both topics can be covered in one group? (fewer sub-topics)

⁵ Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

An introduction at the start of the group (which we suggest would be around two hours long, with a break) would provide a full briefing of the project, of what progress has been made so far in terms of the stages completed and what we have learnt, and what we need to achieve at the end of the group. A possible approach within each group is summarised in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Proposed structure for domain-specific extended groups



Appendix 1 Focus Group Discussion Guide

Progress in Australia – pilot exploratory work with community members

Discussion Guide V2.0

The specific objectives of these focus group discussions are:

- To bring groups of people together to discuss what is important for them, and people like them, in assessing how well Australia is doing (apart from in relation to economic growth)
- To encourage them to discuss, debate and agree responses to questions such as:
 - What do we want for Australia’s future – what kind of Australia do you want to live in?
 - What kind of society we should be leaving for future generations? What should it look like?
 - What defines community and society ‘well-being’? What kinds of things are important?
 - How do we know if Australia is progressing as a society – what kinds of things should we be looking at or measuring?
- To begin to identify and define different areas or ‘domains’ that are important, and why they are important
- To identify the extent to which there are differences or similarities in these domains between different groups of people (defined for this pilot exercise by life-stage)
- To use ‘case study’ vignettes to encourage respondents to be thinking about *people like them* rather than their own individual and personal expectations.

Explanation to participants

- Introduce Group Moderator and observers (gain consent to be observed).
- Thank participants for their time and contribution
- Explain what the research is about - *“We’re here to talk about the kind of Australia we might want to see, both now and in the future. We are at the start of an important national study which is developing a measure of progress for Australia. By this I mean something that tells us how we are doing as individuals, communities and a nation. Across the world, it is being recognised that economic indicators (like GDP) don’t tell us enough about how societies are progressing – we need to look at other things. [Refer to Participant Information Leaflet, distribute copies if needed].”*
- Explain recording, and client viewing (if applicable) and confidentiality of participant information. – *“With your permission we would like to audio-record the group. The recording will only be used to help us with analysing the results. Your personal details are confidential, and we will not keep or pass on any personal information about you. Is it OK for us to record the group?”*
- Explain the importance of honest opinions – *“Your views and experience are important, so we would like you to tell us what you think and feel about each of the topics we talk about. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the issues we are discussing today, so it is important that you provide us with your honest opinions and that you understand that we will not make any judgements of you for your opinions. Also, it is not necessary for everyone to agree with each other. It is helpful for us to find out the different opinions that people have, as well as where people have the same opinions, so please feel free to tell us whatever you think and feel, even if it might be different to what other people in the room are saying. It is also important that you know that everything that we talk about today is treated with confidence, and we expect that you will also treat anything that you hear in the discussion with confidence, thanks.”*
- Housekeeping – refreshments, mobile phones on silent, speaking one a time, fire exits etc
- Any questions before starting?

Introductions (5 mins)

You have all been invited here today because you are all [retired, families with children etc]. Let's start by some introductions (round table): your first name, how long lived in the area and your current circumstances/situation (amend accordingly depending on group).

Context to the Research

The general accepted measure of a country's progress is in economic terms – typically Gross Domestic Product. This is often used to tell us how well a country is doing by looking at economic production – the goods and services that we produce and sell as a country.

This research is the beginnings of a much larger project, which is underpinned by the agreement that using measures such as GDP doesn't really tell us the full story of how well a society is doing – and that there are many other factors that make up a good society. This is why you are here today – to help us to identify what other things are important. Whilst there are a number of organisations working together on this, it is also very important that the research is grounded in what the general public believe, not just what professional or academic experts believe. Quite a complex subject to think about, which is why we asked you to give it a little bit of thought before today.

Warm-up (15 mins)

Let's start by hearing what's good and not so good about Australia (individuals to write on paper and then read out to add to flip chart – begin to build list)

What are the good things about living in Australia today? (what are you most proud of?)

What are the 'not so good' things about living in Australia today? (what are you least proud of?)

If you were in a position of power and could make things happen, what would be the main things you would try to do to make Australia a better place? Prompt – trying to get a sense of main priorities? *Add to list on flip chart*

Building the list (15)

We have come up with a list of different areas that we might look at when thinking about how we are doing as a country. Look at this list now (hand out) and see how it matches with what you've come up with. What's missing? What is new/not yet mentioned? Are any of these issues less important (why?)

LIST

- Personal relationships (ie family and friends)
- Community well-being
- Cultural diversity
- Health and well-being (among different groups, eg cyp, ATSI, older)
- Recreation and leisure time
- Harnessing technology (access, usage)
- Innovation
- Democracy and governance
- Financial security (economic life and prosperity)
- Education
- Environment and sustainability
- Justice and fairness
- Safety and security
- Infrastructure (investment, traffic/transport, utilities etc)
- Work and life (eg employment opportunities, work/life balance)
- What else?

Unpacking and defining the items (30 minutes)

Let's look at each in turn - how do we know if we are progressing, as a society in these areas? What kinds of things should we be looking at? *Use flip chart*

So what does each of these 'domains' actually mean? What are the important aspects or elements – how can we define these so they are meaningful (in thinking about progress)?

Themes and priorities (10 minutes)

What dominant themes have emerged from our discussions, in terms of thinking about the 'goals' for Australian society?

Can we prioritise these in any way?

How will we know if we are progressing in the right direction?

Review and Reflections (5 minutes)

Revisit areas identified at the start – anything missing? (*check flipcharts and post-its*)

Anything on the lists that is not so important?

Anything on the list that we couldn't defend (eg, if we presented this to government, would we be able to justify why these 'domains' are on our list when thinking about what's important for Australian society?)

Any other questions?

Thank and close

Appendix 2 Participant Information Sheet



Research project: ‘What kind of Australia do we want to live in?’

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. This document is designed to give you some more information about the research, and what participating in the focus group will involve.

What is the research about?

We all want a better life, for ourselves, our families and our children, our community, and our country. How well a country is doing is often measured by looking at economic growth. However, increasingly it is recognised that other measures – such as quality of life, our society’s well-being and our environment – are just as important.

But how do we know if we, as a nation, are on the right tracks and making progress? What kinds of things should we be looking at? Answering these questions is not just a matter for academics, policy-makers and politicians but is a democratic question for all Australians. This research, which is part of a much larger national study, seeks to engage directly with members of the community to find out what is important to people when thinking about how Australia is progressing. Other countries in other parts of the world are also undertaking similar studies so the findings are also important at an international level. In Australia, we are beginning the community consultation element by running a series of focus groups with different groups of people, to start to understand what is important to people and their communities and how this relates to the country as a whole.

Who is supporting the research?

The research is supported by a large group of partners, including universities, non-government organisations, churches and community groups. The partners have come together under the title of ‘Australia’s Progress in the 21st Century’ and have asked the Social Research Centre to conduct the first part of the consultation with the community.

Who is the Social Research Centre?

The Social Research Centre is an independent research company who specialises in undertaking social research projects. We have been operating for over 10 years and have conducted hundreds of research studies with members of the public for a range of public sector clients and government organisations on topics as diverse as driving, health and gambling. If you would like further information about us you can visit our website at www.srcentre.com.au.

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a form of research in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes on a topic or idea. Questions are asked in an informal setting where participants are free to talk with other group members. Generally the focus group will consist of eight participants and a researcher who guides the discussion. With your consent, we normally audio-record the discussion to ensure that we have an accurate record of everything that is said. In some cases, our client may wish to observe the discussion – you will be advised of this. Further details about taking part in a focus group are available at <http://www.srcentre.com.au/participants/focus-group-participants>.

Is the information collected confidential?

Your responses will remain strictly confidential and will be reported only as part of the general findings from the research. For additional information about confidentiality, please refer to <http://www.srcentre.com.au/general/privacy>.

How will the findings be used?

The outcomes from this and other discussions will be collated and analysed by researchers at the Social Research Centre and a report is provided to help to inform the next stage of the research. Individuals are not identified in any of the reporting we do.

Will I get paid for taking part?

Yes, you will receive \$75 in cash as a thank-you for your participation and to cover any travel costs to enable you to attend the discussion.

Do I need to prepare anything in advance?

You don't need to prepare anything in advance as such. However, we would like you to give some thought to these 4 questions as we will be discussing them in the focus group.

- 1. What do you want for Australia's future?**
- 2. What kind of society should we be leaving for future generations?**
- 3. What defines community and society 'well-being'?**
- 4. How do we know we are progressing as a society – what kind of things should we be looking at?**

Perhaps you might like to talk about these issues with your partner, family or friends to see what they think. There are no right or wrong answers! We are just interested in your views so it would be useful if you have given the topics above a little bit of thought before coming to the group.

Do I need to provide anything on the day?

If you need reading glasses then please bring them. Tea/coffee and light refreshments will be provided. The discussion will last for 1½ hours.

Your contribution is greatly valued and we hope you find the experience interesting – this is a unique opportunity for you to have a say in what is important for Australia's progress and development so we look forward to meeting you.

If you have any queries about the research, please contact Karen Kellard at the Social Research Centre on 03 9236 8509 or by email karen.kellard@srcentre.com.au.