

A Critical Approach to Evidence-based Resettlement Policy:  
Lessons Learned from an Australian Muslim Refugee Sports Program

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**Abstract**

The increasing emphasis placed on evidence-based policy in government and community organisations presents some interesting challenges and potential opportunities in the area of immigration research. Policy in this area, perhaps more so than any other, has been influenced by various public discourses that to a considerable extent have been devoid of an evidence-base. The area is therefore ripe territory for academics to construct a more critically oriented approach to evidence-based policy that aims for greater transparency and justification grounded in research findings. This paper outlines how evidence-based research can move beyond being research *for* policies to being research *of* policies through critically evaluating immigration and resettlement policies in terms of their objectives, relevance and effectiveness through the lens of program evaluation. The case of the Australian government's cultural integration program for refugee settlers will be examined, with the lessons learned from a program that attempted to link Muslim youth to community sporting clubs being discussed in relation to the critical approach outlined.

**Key words:** evidence-based policy, Muslim youth, program evaluation, immigration policy

**Introduction**

The shift towards evidence-based policy-making in community planning theoretically provides greater opportunity for academic researchers to play an increased role in informing social policy and programs. However much of this drive seems to be about research *for* policies rather than research *of* policies, and lacks a critical, open-ended inquiry that seeks to determine whether the policies are rational to begin with, relevant to the objectives sought, and ultimately effective. This raises the question of how researchers associated with critical and deconstructionist theoretical perspectives might deal with the ideological/discursive underpinnings of State policy that is seen to be primarily aimed at the social control of populations. This is no more apparent than in the area of immigration policy, which in many countries has been driven by xenophobic fears concerning socio-cultural integration,

national security, job losses and other perceived threats, often with racist overtones.

In this paper this issue will be addressed through an examination of recent Australian immigration policies that aim to integrate Muslim communities with mainstream community life. In 2005-06 this policy was explicitly linked to the National Action Plan (NAP) that essentially aims to acculturate new Muslim arrivals in traditional Australian values, reducing racial intolerance and avoiding the development of separatist cultures that might promote terrorist activity. One particular recommendation of the NAP (2005) will be the focus of discussion – support for sport placement programs that seek to integrate Muslim children with mainstream sporting clubs. The experiences of the authors in managing a placement program that aimed to do just this, but ultimately failed to elicit the enthusiasm of participants who had other

ideas on how best to organise themselves in relation to sport, will provide an insight into the disjunctures that can sometimes exist between national policy goals and community goals, and the manner in which academic researchers might seek to promote a more critically-oriented evidence-based approach to policy that seeks to conduct research *of*, not just research *for*, government policy initiatives. Further, it seeks to do this, not through policy analysis alone, but through program evaluation that is mindful of the implications and impacts of policy.

Three main stages are characterised as being involved in a critically-oriented evidence-based approach: an evaluation of policy objectives (which determines the point of the policy); an evaluation of policy relevance (which determines whether the policy is practical); and an evaluation of policy effectiveness (which determine whether the policy does what it intends to do). It is argued that these aspects of policy assessment can be partly addressed through critical oriented program evaluation that not only investigates program aspects but also the policies that underlie them, serving as a lens to their evidence-base. An evaluation of a program that sought to involve Muslim youth in sport will be used to illustrate.

**Australian immigration policy and evidence-based research**

Australian immigration policy has had a long history as one based largely on an irrational fear of the 'Other' and imagined threats to national security and something referred to as the "Australian way of life" (Northcote, Hancock & Casimiro, 2007) The Immigration Restriction Act 1901 was enacted in the first year of Federation, limiting immigration to those with linguistic and cultural similarity to the mostly British-born settlers. The racial underpinnings of the policy were openly admitted, with the Australian government themselves referring to it as the 'White Australia' policy. The

experience of World War II produced a national security concern for Australia's low population base, which was felt to be insufficient to defend the nation (Collins, 1988). Consequently, Australia opened its doors to refugees from war-torn Europe who were linguistically and culturally different from the dominant Anglo-Australian culture. A new policy was needed to ensure the protection of 'Australian' values, and the assimilation policy was devised, which saw refugees selected on the basis of their potential to be 'Australianised' (for example, Greeks and Italians were selected over people from other nationalities). Finally, the policy of multiculturalism was introduced in the 1970s to allow Asian immigrants to be admitted, particularly those from Vietnam which Australia felt a moral obligation to accept as part of its participation in the South-East Asian conflict. With the policy of multiculturalism, it was accepted that Australia could harmoniously exist as a culturally diverse society, yet the integration of migrant groups was still a paramount objective (see Jupp, 1998 and Jureidini, 2002 for an overview of Australian immigration history),

In the 1990s unauthorised arrivals from Asia and the Middle East, and increasing number of refugees accepted from Muslim countries, reinforced the association of immigration policy with national security. The Howard Government was criticised for using the "illegal immigrant" threat as an election boost (see Betts 1999, 2002; Steketee, 2002). After the 9/11 attacks and Bali bombings, the integration of Muslim arrivals became a high priority (Muslim Youth Summit Report, 2007). Following the London terrorist bombings, the Council of Australian Governments held a Special Meeting on Counter-Terrorism convened by the Prime Minister, the State Premiers, the Chief Ministers of the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory and the President of the Australian Local Government Association (Council of Australian Governments, 2005). A number

of security initiatives were developed at this meeting, ranging from increased surveillance of public spaces, preventative detention laws and a blueprint for counter-terrorism emergency exercises. Amongst them, and seemingly the odd-one out in a list of hard-line measures, was the National Action Plan (NAP), an initiative “to strengthen links with Australian Muslim communities and promote respect and understanding” (2005:3). The Department of Immigration and Citizenship, then the Department of Immigration and Multiculturalism and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA), was vested with the task of overseeing NAP, which together with its Living in Harmony (LIH) program, involves a national funding scheme to support community initiatives to promote multicultural harmony.

NAP continues Australia’s long-held association between immigration and fears of an erosion of traditional Australian values, but associates it with national security concerns in a way quite different from the post World War II desire to bring migrants into the country for national defence purposes. The shift in the 1970s to a humanitarian program that saw Australia take on the responsibility of accommodating refugees from war-torn countries, many of them Muslim, led the Australian government into a predicament after the terrorist threat cast suspicion on Muslims. It brought to the fore the conflict between an open-arms approach to those dispossessed and seeking asylum, and the traditional xenophobia that views foreigners as a threat to the Australian way of life (NAP, 2005).

There is little evidence that Muslim communities in Australia could develop into fertile breeding grounds for home-grown terrorists. It is probably fair to say that certain aspects of Muslim culture are in conflict with Australian values, particularly chauvinistic views on women that are prevalent among some sections of the Muslim community. But these are not altogether absent from the wider

community, and are at any rate not what lies behind the government’s fear about national security. Religious differences are often exaggerated, and there is really nothing distinctive about Muslim values when compared with, say, fundamentalist Christian views, which equally frown upon alcohol use, revealing clothing and other religious mores (see Bouma, 1994, Bouma & Brace-Govan, 2000). Views advocating holy jihads against ‘the West’ and other inflammatory discourse have not been a notable feature of the public voice of Muslim leaders. Furthermore, the notion that Muslim immigrants do not mix well with the wider community is rather presumptuous given that many are first generation Australians. To the extent that some sections of the Muslim community have struggled to integrate with the surrounding community, this is mostly due to a variety of socio-economic barriers to wider community participation (Northcote, Hancock & Casimiro, 2006; Casimiro, Hancock & Northcote, 2007), which should probably be the prime focus of resettlement policy rather than concerns about Australian values. Also, the notion of what actually qualifies as “integration” has never been properly defined. Muslim people go shopping, attend universities, are part of the workplace, are seen at the beach and parks, and will go along to major sporting events such as the cricket much like other Australians.

However, despite the lack of evidence for any widespread failure regarding cultural integration of Muslim communities, we would sympathise with the position that it would be irresponsible of government not to pursue a preventative program that seeks to promote mutual understanding and tolerance as one of a suite of measures. The fact is that acts of home-land terrorism do happen, and if left unchecked might increase if pockets of disaffection within the wider community come to offer support for terrorist networks. The benefits of promoting mutual understanding also extend well beyond national security concerns, and so in principle there should

be no objection to policies that promote cultural inclusion, as long as it is done in a culturally sensitive and supportive way and with recognition that other measures that support socio-economic wellbeing also need to be promoted. This brings us to the specific ways policies are implemented and the programs they support, and how academics can assess the value of both through evaluation-based research.

**From research for policies to research of policies**

Carol Weiss (1986, 1988) has identified a number of models of the relationship between researchers and policy. Weiss sees research as a diffuse process which seeps into the consciousness of policymakers from a variety of sources rather than having a direct relationship. Others such as Patton (1997) see the need for a much more direct relationship between research and policy and argue that researchers should take steps to ensure their research is used in a much more explicit way than does Weiss. Both Weiss and Patton have attempted to address the problem of evidence based research and its utilisation. Some scholars have focused on the problem of underuse rather than use of social research and sought to explain why much social research is ignored by policy makers.

A clear example is in National policy agendas that are rarely grounded in evidence, but rather in government ideology and media representations, and perhaps also partly in a risk-averse approach, which means that if there is no strong evidence one way or the other, then a government will take action 'just in case' to avoid the possibility of a worst-case scenario. Researchers and practitioners within government and community organisations find themselves having to work within these agendas as the defining parameters of what they examine and how they examine it. As Stephen Ball (1997) notes: "Policies do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in

deciding what to do is narrowed or changed or particular goals or outcomes are set" (p.270). Academic researchers are, theoretically speaking (although not always in practice), able to work outside these parameters, and in this respect their scope of what counts as an 'evidence-base' for policy can be much more extensive and involve more critical theoretical and deconstructionist elements. For immigration and settlement policies, such an approach is sorely needed.

Moore (1996, p. 159) highlights the difference between research 'of' policy and research 'for' policy: "The former positions the standpoint of the field, the latter is positioned by it". The distinction is pivotal when it comes to working out what governments might mean by 'evidence-based policies,' because there is a big difference between policy-makers who view research as an aid to better implementing their initiatives, and those who view research as a critical tool for evaluating policies. There have been different labels used to distinguish these two approaches, but the term "technical-rationality" aptly sums up the first approach and "critical-evaluative" sums up the second (Gewirtz, 2004). For the most part, policy-makers view evidence-based research in terms of a technical-rational perspective. For example, the US Coalition for Evidence Based Policy aims to "promote government policy-making based on rigorous evidence of program effectiveness" (2002:1), a view that has come to dominate the discourse of evidence based policy as it has been utilised by governments and community groups elsewhere.

Gewirtz (2004), talking about the problems of researchers getting involved in technical-rational (what she calls "engineering") research, remarks:

One of the common ways in which this dilemma manifests itself is in decisions about whether to participate in narrowly focused government-sponsored evaluation studies which

can either be seen as an opportunity to smuggle critical perspectives into mainstream projects or as a means of being co-opted into projects and policies that may well have predominantly oppressive consequences... (p.17).

Marston and Watts (2003) see a danger in social researchers being co-opted into government policy agendas with a technical approach to evaluation that ignores the critical dimension. They remark:

... if advocating evidence-based policy means proposing that policy-making can be reduced to the technical calculation of effectiveness and costing of well-defined policy options then the answer must be 'no' (p.158).

They assert further:

There is a risk that 'evidence-based policy' will become a means for policy elites [to] increase their strategic control over what constitutes knowledge about social problems in a way that devalues tacit forms of knowledge, practice based wisdom, professional judgment, and the voices of ordinary citizens (p.158).

University researchers would seem to be ideally placed to perform the function of evaluation watch-dog, except that often they do not get to see the research briefs that government agencies commission, nor have they developed a critical apparatus for assessing them even when they do.

Putting aside the issue of how academics can become more involved in the policy process (an issue worthy of its own discussion), the question that will preoccupy us here is how can policy research be made more critical-evaluative? The answer we suggest is that policy evaluation needs to take place in three ways – the first is an evaluation of policy objectives, which relates to what a policy seeks to achieve; the second is an evaluation of policy relevance, which relates to whether the policy addresses the problem that it sets out

to resolve; and the third is policy effectiveness, which relates to whether the policy improves outcomes in the ways that are expected. Each of these facets requires an evidence-base, and this is where program evaluation can be useful.

Bolland and Bolland's (1984:334) argue that "both program evaluation and policy analysis are more effective when they are used in conjunction with one another." In terms of policy objectives, program evaluation can provide a window into how programs seek to achieve the outcomes sought by policy makers through the way policy principles are translated into practice. Program evaluation also provides the opportunity for testing the relevance of the policy to particular problems, and also its effectiveness in improving outcomes. The issue of Muslim participation in organised sport will be used to demonstrate – an area of interest in NAP as a means of integrating Muslim people with the wider community. We will first look at Australian policy initiatives such as NAP and LIH that attempt to integrate Muslim youth in mainstream community life, before examining the case of a program that sought to achieve these objectives through involving Muslim youth in organised sport.

### **Involving Muslim Youth in Sport**

NAP has a particular focus on integrating Muslim communities with mainstream community life, and one of its strategies for achieving this is to "encourage more active participation in mainstream sporting, social and cultural activities to lessen feelings of isolation and marginalisation in some communities" (Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2007:13).

The interest in sport came out of the Muslim Youth Summits convened as part of the NAP initiative, which were held in all Australian states and territories and attended by over 400 young people between the ages of 12-29 (Dellal, 2007). The summits identified a need to provide opportunities for young people to develop

an 'Australian' social identity through active engagement with the wider community. According to the official report, throughout the summits participants indicated a strong desire for increased opportunities to engage with the wider community through social and recreational activities, in particular sport (strongly identified as an ideal venue for engagement) and discussion forums. Regular social interaction between Muslims and members of the wider community and increased awareness of Islam were identified as key priorities in breaking down barriers and increasing participation in the education system (DIAC, 2007a:12; also see Muslim Youth Summit Report, 2007).

The mention of programs for involving young Muslim people in organised sport in NAP might at first sight seem rather odd in a document concerned with counter-terrorism strategies. But the centrality of organised sport in Australian culture and identity is something that people in other countries might have difficulty appreciating. Light (2008, p. 1) observes, "there are few countries in the world where sport forms such a pervasive and influential aspect of culture and society as it does in Australia." Kell (2000: 23) remarks "sport and Australians' understanding of themselves are intertwined in a complex and enduring way that is absent in other nations."

The view that participation in mainstream sport increases ethnic and cultural harmony has been put forward by a number of scholars (Olliff, 2007; Oliver, 2007: 10; Dykes & Olliff, 2007). Larkin writes: "[O]ne of the key community benefits perceived for sporting activity is its ability to break down cultural barriers between different ethnic (and sometimes language) groups in the community" (2008:12). Morgan writes: "Involvement in sport can therefore be a particularly effective means of promoting refugees' participation in Australian society, and introducing refugees to Australian culture" (n.d.: 11).

On this basis, it would seem that the Australian government is on solid ground in

its support for involving Muslim youth in sport as a means of acculturation into Australian values. The problem is that these sorts of claims are without any evidence base themselves, and reflect more an ideology of organised sport as an equalising institution and a bastion of Australian values of fair play, egalitarianism and social unity, which is more mythic in quality rather than rooted in the intrinsic benefits of organised sport.

Indeed there is also a darker side to club sport in Australia, such as racism, alcohol misuse, and chauvinism, which are well publicized in the media and, as we discovered in the sporting program discussed later, are particularly feared by Muslim parents. This is also supported by Kahan's (2003) study of Muslim youth participation in the United States. In fact, there is no evidence that participation in community sporting clubs makes people better citizens, and on this basis it is difficult to see the advantage of encouraging Muslim youth to join community sporting clubs if they are not naturally inclined to do so. The fact that such suggestions came out of a consultation process involving Muslim youth is interesting (Muslim Youth Summit Report, 2007). Without information on how these sessions were conducted, who was invited and under what terms of reference, it is not possible to treat this as evidence of community support, particularly when countervailing evidence is found (as it was in the program described later) that Muslim youth are not as predisposed to participating in community sporting clubs as the Australian government would hope.

One might argue, in fact, that Muslim children are well advised to concentrate on their schooling (as many Muslim parents would prefer) as a better means for lifting themselves out of their lower socio-economic position. In doing so, they stand a better chance of acquiring a university education and professional occupations where they will be inevitably exposed to wider Australian culture and its associated values anyway (also see Wilson, 1998). In

fact, it is difficult to see the logic in the Australian government's cultural integration program, which seems to be based primarily on a sentimental view of Australian cultural institutions rather than well thought-out social objectives.

There are of course other benefits to sporting participation related to health and wellbeing. However Australian Bureau of Statistic research indicates that Muslim children have higher rates of physical activity than most other Australians (ABS, 2006), even while their participation in community sporting clubs is lower (Muir, Sawrikar and Cortis, 2007). Therefore there is little need based on health reasons to involve Muslim youth in community sporting clubs.

On the basis of existing evidence, then, the policy of encouraging Muslim children to be involved in community sports for the purposes of moulding them into better citizens would seem to be without foundation. Of course, even if such a policy was justified on grounds of evidence, this is still not to say that it is actually practical, and this brings us to the matter of policy implementation.

### **Applying Evidence-based research: The Case of Muslim Youth in Sport**

In 2007 the authors applied for a Living in Harmony (LIH) community grant to implement a placement program that linked Muslim youth to organised sporting clubs. Since renamed the Diverse Australia program by the Rudd Government, the LIH program was set up by the Howard Government in 1998 as part of its election commitment to establish an antiracism education and awareness campaign. As a community grants initiative, the program accorded with DIMIA's objective "to continue to foster a society which values Australian citizenship and social cohesion, and enables migrants and refugees to participate fully and equitably in Australian society" (DIAC, 2009:3). Funded projects centred on Harmony Day – a national day of multicultural celebration held on 21

March, coinciding with the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

The choice of focusing on refugee youth involvement in sport was influenced by sport, refugees and youth being three of the four funding priority areas in the 2007 round. According to the guidelines, "Projects should involve the broader community and get Australians together to explore issues over a sustained period of time" (DIAC, 2007b:9). Specifically, all projects were to promote:

- the importance of all Australians respecting one another;
- understanding and commitment to other Australian values such as commitment to democracy and the rule of law, equality, freedom of speech and religion, a sense of fairness and a fair go, as well as English as the national language;
- participation and a sense of belonging for everyone; and
- a celebration of our successes as Australians, particularly in integrating migrants into our community.

The examples of previously funded projects that applicants were requested to keep in mind when preparing their applications variously involved encouraging new arrivals to "embrace traditional Australian values" and interact with "typical Australian youth." As part of the funding requirements, the project also needed to promote a Harmony Day event.

The authors, who were interested in exploring the barriers to wider community participation among Muslim youth, felt that a sports program that linked Muslim youth to local sporting clubs and evaluated the success and failures of the program would achieve the objectives of both DIAC and themselves. The Local Government Area of Belmont – adjacent to the City of Perth – was chosen as the area of focus, as the

project team had strong links with one of the Muslim community organisations there and with the City of Belmont council, who both became community partners in the project.

The project team was informed that their project application would initially be assessed by the National Action Plan committee for funding from its program, but when for whatever reason it was passed up by the NAP, it was duly assessed by the LIH committee and given approval. The Muslim Youth in Sport project was planned as a pilot program aiming to promote participation in organised sport for young Muslim people living in the Belmont area using a family-cantered approach, that is, one that works closely with parents and their children to promote consensus and shared involvement. To help ensure that the program was appropriate and addressed cultural or religious sensitivities, the project required parental involvement, participation and support. The objective was to involve the youths in organised sporting clubs in the local district. Three project officers were employed (one liaising with the sporting clubs, and the other two with the Muslim families), with their role being to work with the families and report to the project leaders on any problems experienced. An evaluation was planned for the conclusion of the program involving interviews with families, club officials and program staff to examine the challenges and successes of the program in some depth.

When work began on the program, it became apparent that some parents were hesitant to be involved. The Project Officers working with the families, who were themselves Muslim community workers well known to the families, reported that this hesitation was based on the commitment, both financial and time, that organised sport placed on the youth and their families. For this reason it was difficult to have families commit to the program during the initial phase.

Another problem was that the project officers encountered hesitation on behalf of the youth in terms of the level of commitment required. Despite an initial enthusiasm to be involved in sports (mainly just soccer and cricket, with only the former being available during winter when the program ran), the youth were reluctant to commit to participation in community sporting clubs. Part of the reason for this was a preference to play "one match." In other words there seemed to be a preference of less-regimental leisure styled sports over organised club training and competitions that involved constant involvement.

Due to the lack of interest from young people and their parents, the project took a different approach to see how young people might still be encouraged to participate in organised sport. One suggestion was to have a community sporting day where the whole community could get involved which would solve the issue of having youth not commit themselves to a full season. This was not successful because it was difficult to arrange coaches. The next step was to approach the local campus of the Australian Islamic College. The Muslim community worker was able to approach the teachers at the college to work with the youth in school-time to foster their interest in organised sport. A meeting was held with the Principal and with the Physical Education teacher. During the Harmony Week celebrations (March 15-21) the Muslim project officer set up an information stand at the school gymnasium where they were holding different Harmony Week activities. She addressed the assembly to inform the students about the project. They could then come up to the stand if they were interested in finding out more information, where information packs were available with registration forms and information about the different clubs in the area. However, there was still little interest shown from the youth in joining established clubs.



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Consequently, an informal soccer competition was organised for boys during the April school holidays and occasionally after school. With the help of the project officer, this was run with the aim of promoting participation, skills and knowledge in popular sport. The older boys in the community coached and umpired matches involving younger boys. Addressing the youth's preference to play the sport in a 'one off' setting, free of the commitment that is involved with organised club sport, the program successfully reached some of the initial goals of the project. By informally participating on a sporting field with the barriers of organised sports removed (for example age, uniform, rules) the program was able to promote regular participation. Parents were also encouraged to come down and watch the kids play soccer. Another result of the informal meetings was that local Indigenous youth became involved and played against the Muslim youth as part of their own team. These relationships also provided an avenue to extend their participation in playing informal games of basketball in addition to soccer. These games continued throughout the winter season.

The next step was to introduce a range of different sports to the youth who attended the College through their Physical Education program. This phase of the program aimed to extend their knowledge of sports beyond the soccer that they were familiar. These sports included rugby, cricket, basketball, netball, volleyball, Aussie Rules football and tennis. One direct outcome of this was that two male students approached the community worker to join a wrestling club at Belmont Senior High School. Meanwhile, many students expressed interest in forming their own soccer teams, with 30 male and 19 female students aged between 13-17 years participating in this part of the program.

It appears that one of the main reasons this approach was successful, particularly among female students, was that the College was able to provide them with a

venue where they could be assured of gender inclusive interaction. The attraction of this form of sports participation for Muslim girls lies in the ability of the school to ensure separation of genders, as it remains a culturally and religiously sensitive issue for the participants and their families. This understanding led to the girls participating in games against the local African Youth Association girls' team.

The boys' team competed in a number of games against a police team and teams from the African Youth Association. Members from this team joined organised teams competing in the local African Nations Cup, which the program helped sponsor. The cooperation of the African Youth Association demonstrated that the youth, particularly in the female demographic, were able to participate in cross-cultural events while adhering to culturally appropriate etiquette.

Overall, the youth were enthusiastic about playing in their own self-organised teams and were well supported by their parents in doing this, but the youth were very reluctant to join community sporting clubs. The reasons for this were explored with coaches, parents, program staff and youth in interviews and focus groups carried out at the end of the program. One coach claimed that parental support in the older age group was "non-existent". The Project Officers raised the notion that because of some of the families' settlement status, sporting participation was not high on the priority list. The issue was also raised by the parents themselves in the focus groups. Given the demands placed on Muslim families to deal with ongoing settlement issues, it is not surprising that the involvement of their children in sporting clubs would not be one of their top priorities, particularly since the tradition of enrolling your children in sporting clubs and driving them to matches is not part of their cultural heritage. Some youth stated that their parents continue to be concerned that their school work will suffer because they will "only want to have fun playing sport."

They said that their parents also did not know enough about the clubs and the risks posed to their children. In the case of girls, they were particularly worried about mixing with any males, including coaches. The youth said that they preferred being with other Muslims, stating that it made things easier to be together and not "the only one" at a community sporting club.

### **Implications of the Program Evaluation for Policy**

The government policy of encouraging Muslim youth to participate in community sporting clubs for the purposes of cultural integration was given mixed support by the program evaluation findings. Certainly, there was evidence of a prevalent fear among Muslim youth and their families with regards to interacting with other Australians who are deemed to lack understanding of Muslim practices. So in terms of the rationale for the cultural inclusion policy, the study findings suggest there is a need for promoting mutual understanding for the purposes of harmonious cultural relations (as desired by the Living in Harmony initiative). Whether or not such inclusion is important for national security (as desired by the NAP initiative) is another matter, and could not be assessed through this particular program evaluation. In terms of policy relevance, the aim of linking youth to community sporting clubs as a means to achieve cultural integration was problematic, given the failure of participants themselves to see its importance or relevance. There is a distinction between 'etic' evaluations (outsider perspectives) and 'emic' evaluations (insider perspectives) (see Geertz, 1983), and policy makers can have different ways of measuring relevance when it comes to matters such as acculturation than participants themselves because their objectives, priorities and understandings differ. But there is a problem if the disjuncture is such that programs fail to get off the ground because the relevance of the policy is deemed to be lacking by participants. This brings us to the matter of

policy effectiveness. There are practical issues in implementing programs when those concerned do not want to participate or cannot participate for a variety of social and cultural reasons, hence undermining the effectiveness of the policy frameworks underlying them.

In terms of the failure to place the Muslim youth with mainstream sporting clubs, it could be argued that it was the program itself that was deficient, not the policy underlying it. Certainly, the program may have been more successful in this respect if it were possible to gradually introduce parents and youths to community sporting clubs in a way that is culturally secure and breaks down preconceptions and fears (certainly for younger Muslim children, most of the barriers that affect older youth are not as salient). But involving recently arrived Muslim youth in community sporting clubs would require a sustained program of gradual familiarization and trust-building that would be expensive and would probably not have enough time to reach fruition before youth graduated from high school anyway. Besides, the question must be asked whether any cultural integration that is achieved through community sports participation would lead to greater loyalty and appropriate 'Australian' values than what would otherwise be achieved through other avenues (such as education and employment) or through no sustained cultural inclusion program at all? This is where evaluation of alternative programs, such as those designed to foster integration through education and employment, would need to be considered.

Whether it is the policy or the programs that lack effectiveness can only really be determined through a comprehensive review of programs that seeks to identify the factors behind their success or failure. Based on the one case presented in this paper, it is not possible to form any definitive conclusion, although the results of the program evaluation do suggest that there may be a case to answer. In principle, however, a thorough review of a series of

programs should elicit the answer to such questions and allow underlying policies to be assessed in terms of the rationale, relevance and effectiveness.

### Conclusion

Since 2005-06, the National Action Plan (NAP) has aimed to acculturate new Muslim arrivals in traditional Australian values, reducing racial intolerance and avoiding the development of separatist cultures that might promote terrorist activity. One particular recommendation of the NAP is to support sport placement programs that seek to integrate Muslim children with mainstream sporting clubs. The experiences of the project team in managing a placement program that was aligned with the NAP objectives (although was ultimately funded under the Living in Harmony initiative) failed to elicit the enthusiasm of participants, and this lack of enthusiasm was deemed to be related to the inappropriateness of those objectives in terms of the more pressing needs and circumstances of the families concerned. The extent to which this can be attributed to the failure of policy or the programs was left inconclusive, but it is suggested that in principle a study of multiple programs should elicit an answer to such questions.

The paper outlined an approach to evidence-based research that moves beyond being research *for* policies to being research *of* policies through critical oriented program evaluation. The approach suggests that both policies and the programs that implement them can (and should) be critically evaluated in terms of their objectives, relevance and effectiveness. It also underlines the important role that academic researchers can play in promoting a more critically-oriented evidence-based approach to policy that seeks to conduct research *of*, not just research *for*, government policy initiatives.

It is vital that immigration and resettlement policies are subject to a greater degree of scrutiny by academic researchers, and in this respect the concept of 'evidence-based

policy' needs to be framed in terms of a critical theory/deconstructionist lens. It has been suggested here that this task needs to take place on several levels, and this includes gathering evidence on the objectives, relevancy and effectiveness of policies through an evaluation of the programs that seek to put them into practice.

To acquire such evidence, it will be necessary for social researchers to not only engage more fully with the policy-making process, but also with community programs and their outcomes. Such an approach raises important issues concerning how researchers position themselves in their relationships with government agencies and community organisations, particularly in the face of the dilemma that an overly critical stance will do little to encourage such partnerships to begin with, yet an uncritical approach merely makes research an instrument for social control by the State or regulatory discourses. The issue of how academics might engage with policy-makers in practical terms has not been addressed here, but finding the right balance will certainly be a key challenge if a critical approach to evidence-based policy of the kind outlined here is to be achieved.

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