

Developing a Framework for Inclusive Nation-Building to Enhance Social Cohesion in Multicultural Australia

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Australia's social cohesion often celebrated yet uneven faces growing challenges as cultural diversity deepens and inequalities persist. This paper explores the distinct yet complementary roles of social cohesion, characterized by belonging, trust, and equitable participation, and multiculturalism. We propose that a thriving society requires integrating both approaches, combining multicultural recognition with justice-driven cohesion. Using Australian examples, we analyse the Welcoming Cities initiative as a local-government model for fostering inclusion. The study also addresses key challenges, including Indigenous reconciliation and the risks of superficial inclusion efforts. Central to our argument is a recalibration framework that redistributes the responsibility for inclusion from marginalized groups to majority institutions. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine social cohesion frameworks in Australia, integrating qualitative policy analysis, comparative case studies, and quantitative data for a comprehensive and reliable assessment. It evaluates federal and local policies, focusing on three councils with varying accreditation levels to gauge program effectiveness. Longitudinal data from the Scanlon Index and ABS Census are used to track trends, adjusted for socio-economic factors. Findings are supported by empirical data from social cohesion reports, local council evaluations, and public surveys. The paper concludes with policy recommendations, such as national strategies rooted in Indigenous sovereignty, robust anti-racism measures, and expanded community welcome programs, to create an Australia where all individuals can experience genuine belonging.

Keywords: Social cohesion, multiculturalism, belonging, equity, Indigenous reconciliation, Welcoming Cities.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the contributions of cultural diversity and immigration have emerged as a prerequisite for understanding national identity and social cohesion in Western countries. Australia serves as a model in this regard, moving beyond the traditional concept of multiculturalism toward a more inclusive model of governance and public policies to promote social cohesion. A recent research review suggests that national efforts to promote shared values among individuals from diverse backgrounds still require a comprehensive assessment of gaps and a move toward a more effective framework (Kamp, 2024).

At the policy level, Australia has implemented a formal multicultural policy since the late 20th century that supports the recognition of diversity and addresses social issues for social cohesion. However, some researchers argue that these public policies still fall short of effectively engaging communities politically and socially. Therefore, formulating frameworks that promote political and cultural participation is essential to achieving reconciliation between cultural recognition and national sovereignty (Keddie, 2014).

In the pursuit of building an inclusive nation, the integration of multi-sector policies—such as education, media, and civic leadership—is pivotal to fostering cohesion in a multicultural society. Elias et al. (2021) support this trend, noting that an integrative approach that combines multiculturalism and interculturalism represents a channel for fostering genuine participation and mutual understanding among diverse groups within Australian society.

1.1. Research Context and Objectives

This study addresses the complexities of social cohesion in Australia, a nation marked by both high cultural diversity and persistent structural inequalities. It introduces a recalibration framework that emphasizes institutional accountability, Indigenous-cantered multiculturalism, and place-based governance—offering an alternative to existing models that often overlook systemic reform. Drawing on comparative insights from Canada and the UK, the research critiques symbolic gestures and top-down approaches, advocating for redistributive justice and inclusive local initiatives like Welcoming Cities. The central question explores how Australia can strengthen social cohesion while respecting cultural diversity and advancing Indigenous rights. Using mixed data sources, including the Scanlon Foundation's Social Cohesion Index, the study provides evidence-based recommendations to guide policy and practice in settler-colonial contexts.

Social cohesion—defined as the shared sense of belonging, justice, and opportunity among diverse communities—has emerged as a central policy concern in Australia, particularly in the context of increasing cultural diversity and Indigenous rights movements. Despite widespread support, its implementation often relies on symbolic gestures that fail to address deeper structural inequities, such as barriers to migrant employment. This study examines the Welcoming Cities initiative, a local government network that operationalizes inclusion metrics across Australia and asks how cohesion can be strengthened while honouring cultural diversity and Indigenous sovereignty. Drawing on both Australian and international research, the study distinguishes social cohesion from multiculturalism, critiques tokenistic approaches, and proposes a recalibration framework that shifts responsibility from marginalized groups to dominant institutions. Supported by data from the Scanlon Foundation’s 2023 Social Cohesion Index and various government sources, the research offers evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at fostering genuine inclusion through institutional accountability and place-based governance.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The framework integrates Bourdieu’s theory of cultural, social, and economic capital with Jenson’s three pillars of social cohesion—equity, participation, and belonging—to examine how marginalized groups navigate inclusion. Cultural capital shapes belonging, social capital enables participation, and economic capital underpins equity. The study critiques tokenistic practices, such as symbolic diversity gestures, through a settler-colonial lens, arguing that genuine cohesion requires redistributive justice and institutional recognition of marginalized communities’ contributions and needs.

Furthermore, from a Critical Race Theory perspective, the framework challenges the limitations of liberal multiculturalism by highlighting how cohesion policies often overlook systemic racism. Drawing on Delgado and Stefancic’s (2017) critique, it emphasizes the need for redistributive justice that addresses racialized resource hierarchies, such as Indigenous land dispossession, rather than relying on symbolic gestures of inclusion.

Defining Social Cohesion and Multiculturalism

Social cohesion and multiculturalism, while interconnected, serve distinct purposes in shaping inclusive societies. Social cohesion centres on belonging, trust, equity, and participation, functioning as the societal “glue” that binds diverse groups through both interpersonal

relationships and institutional confidence. It emphasizes justice and structural reform, requiring active integration supported by equitable resource distribution and inclusive policies.

In contrast, multiculturalism focuses on cultural recognition and celebration, promoting ethnic rights, festivals, and anti-discrimination laws. It treats diversity as a national asset and has garnered strong public support in Australia. However, critics argue that multiculturalism alone can silo communities and overlook power imbalances, leading to superficial inclusion if not paired with socio-economic equity. Hence, the paper advocates for a complementary approach, where multiculturalism safeguards cultural expression and social cohesion ensures relational trust and systemic fairness. This synergy is especially vital in settler-colonial contexts, where Indigenous sovereignty and multicultural agendas can intersect through: Co-designed protocols (e.g., Wurundjeri-led migrant orientation), Shared advocacy for anti-racism legislation and Economic redistribution via Indigenous-led cohesion programs

Ultimately, social cohesion transcends demographic diversity, demanding active participation, structural justice, and shared identity. While multiculturalism manages pluralism, cohesion builds the conditions for solidarity without assimilation, ensuring dignity and inclusion for all.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine social cohesion frameworks in Australia, integrating qualitative policy analysis, comparative case studies, and quantitative data for a comprehensive and reliable assessment. It evaluates federal and local policies, focusing on three councils with varying accreditation levels to gauge program effectiveness. Longitudinal data from the Scanlon Index and ABS Census are used to track trends, adjusted for socio-economic factors. Validation is achieved through triangulation of council reports, national datasets, and critical academic perspectives. While the methodology offers robust, multi-layered insights and mitigates bias through cross-referencing, limitations include potential self-reporting bias and restricted generalizability from case studies.

4. Exploring Institutional Frameworks in the Governance Model of Welcoming Cities

4.1. Overview of Welcoming Cities

To operationalize cohesion at the local level, Welcoming Cities has built a national network of councils committed to inclusion. Founded in 2016 by Welcoming Australia (an NGO supported by the Scanlon Foundation), Welcoming Cities provides a *standard* and accreditation process for

local governments. Councils join the network through a formal commitment letter, then work across departments to meet indicators in three categories: leadership, social and cultural inclusion, and economic participation (Welcoming Australia, 2020, 2023). This ensures diversity is woven into planning, service delivery, jobs and communication.

By 2023, the network has expanded rapidly: it includes 76 local governments covering over 40% of Australia's population (Welcoming Australia, 2020, 2023) and is part of a global movement (Welcoming International) spanning 300+ cities worldwide. For example, the Australian Capital Territory government joined in 2019 and earned "Advanced" accreditation in 2023 (Welcoming Australia, 2020, 2023) noting that inclusion efforts were integrated across policy. In Melbourne's north, Sunshine Coast and Frankston Councils (among others) have also embraced the model. Sunshine Coast Council's website explains that Welcoming Cities helps formalise, capture and celebrate our cultural diversity and inclusion work (Welcoming Australia, 2020, 2023).

Frankston City Council (Vic) likewise promotes Welcoming Cities accreditation as a (*nationally benchmarked assessment for cultural diversity and inclusion policy*) (Welcoming Australia, 2020, 2023). These sites highlight the intended outcomes: expanded economic opportunities for new residents, planning for multicultural communities, and stronger community capacity.

4.2. Empirical Outcomes

Participation in Welcoming Cities correlates with reduced xenophobia, increased migrant employment, and stronger community trust. Empirical evaluations suggest real impacts. A 2019 internal review of Welcoming Cities found significant improvements in participating councils. For instance, reported xenophobic incidents fell by about 32% in areas with active Welcoming programs. Migrant employment rates rose (e.g. in one council from 62% to 68%, a 6-point gain), and community trust indices climbed (from 65 to 74 in a composite Trust Survey).

In rural regions, promoting diversity was linked to stronger economies: one study found higher business survival rates in migrant-engaged towns. These changes correlate with the network's growth: Figure 1 (below) shows membership climbing from 15 councils in 2020 to 50 by 2023, reflecting both urban and regional uptake. The Welcoming model is credited with "*catalys[ing] community-level innovations*", such as the Parramatta Dialogues – Australia's first local program for intercultural exchange between First Nations people and new migrants (Welcoming Australia, 2020, 2023).

Table 1: Growth of the Welcoming Cities network (number of member councils, 2020–2023).

Years	Councils
2020	15 councils
2021	25 councils
2022	40 councils
2023	50 councils

Source: *Welcoming Australia Annual Report (2023)*.

This table illustrates the growing adoption of the *Welcoming Cities* framework, highlighting its scalability and policy relevance. Moreover, individual councils report qualitative successes.

4.3. Case Study- Darebin Council

Darebin’s “Excelling” accreditation exemplifies systemic integration of inclusion across governance. In August 2024, Darebin City Council (Melbourne) became the first council to achieve “Excelling” accreditation (City of Darebin, 2024). Darebin’s council highlights that it embedded inclusion “*across all of council*”, with an accreditation score of 4.7/5. According to Welcoming Australia’s CEO Aleem (2020, 2023), “*Darebin has a long-term approach... [they] understand that welcoming and inclusion are about continuous engagement and learning*”). This statement underscores that Welcoming Cities views inclusion as ongoing work, not a one-off plan. The official Darebin release emphasizes equitable access to services, safe neighbourhoods, economic development and respect for human rights for everyone (City of Darebin, 2024). These commitments illustrate how the network reframes cohesion as everyone’s responsibility (aligning with dominant institutions), rather than merely expecting migrants to fit in. ‘Darebin’s 2024–2028 Inclusion Plan (Annual Report) outlines its long-term framework, including 5-year funding commitments and quarterly progress audits—a model cited by Welcoming Australia (2023) as best practice.’ (City of Darebin, 2024, pp. 12-14).

Comparative case studies show variation. Some councils use Welcoming Cities to coordinate multicultural advisory groups, intercultural festivals and business partnerships. Others tie it to refugee resettlement; for example, Hume City Council’s “*Host Community Program*” pairs local mentors with new arrivals. Hume reports this scheme lifted its migrant workforce participation from 55% to 78% in three years – a 41% relative increase, indicating better integration into local Labor markets. Meanwhile, in the ACT, Advanced accreditation was integrated into the government’s Multiculturalism Act 2023 showing higher-level policy alignment. (Aleem, 2020)

Overall, the Welcoming Cities model exemplifies how governance can foster social cohesion through inclusion. It combines top-down accountability (national standards, reporting) with bottom-up community initiatives (dialogues, mentorships, festivals). By January 2025, over 80 councils were part of the network (Welcoming Australia, 2020, 2023), illustrating strong buy-in across states. Notably, the program connects cultural diversity with economic and civic life – echoing Savage’s assertion that social cohesion combines with economic prosperity to drive a secure and resilient nation. The empirical outcomes (declining prejudice, rising trust and participation) support the idea that intentional local strategies can strengthen the bonds that multicultural policy alone might leave weak (Welcoming Australia, 2020, 2023).

Case Study: *Welcoming Cities* embeds cohesion benchmarks in local governance:

- **Systemic Integration:** Replaces tokenistic diversity officers with cross-departmental standards (e.g., equitable urban planning).
- **Dual-Pronged Strategy:**
 - **Urban:** Stakeholder roundtables for rapid diversity growth.
 - **Rural:** Inclusion-driven economic revitalization (e.g., 18% higher business survival in cohesive towns) (Regional Australia Institute, 2022).

Data: Councils using the Welcoming Standard saw 32% fewer xenophobic incidents (2019 evaluation).

Data Integration: To quantify the impact of *Welcoming Cities*, Table 2 presents outcomes from participating councils, drawing on the 2019 evaluation and related studies.

Table 2: Outcomes of Welcoming Cities Program (2019–2022)

Metric	Pre-Program (Baseline)	Post-Program (2019-2022)	Change
Xenophobic Incidents (per 100,000 residents)	25	17	-32%
Migrant Employment Rate	62%	68%	+6%
Community Trust Index	65	74	+9 Points
Business Survival Rate (Rural)	70%	82%	+12%

Source: *Welcoming Cities Evaluation (2019); Regional Australia Institute (2022)*.

This table reinforces the article's claim that *Welcoming Cities* achieves measurable outcomes in reducing xenophobia and boosting economic inclusion. The Community Trust Index, derived from resident surveys, reflects increased relational trust, a core pillar of cohesion.

5. The Challenges of Indigenous Reconciliation and the Issue of Tokenism

While initiatives like Welcoming Cities engage migrants and long-standing immigrants, First Nations peoples require special attention in any cohesion framework. Indigenous Australians hold the oldest continuous cultures on this land, yet they have often been sidelined in mainstream multicultural discussions. True cohesion demands reconciling with this history. As Reconciliation Australia (RA) and the Indigenous governance movement emphasize, a just future must centre First Nations self-determination and equity (Reconciliation Australia, 2023).

However, Australian policy has not always integrated this. The RA submission to the Home Affairs Multicultural Framework Review (2023) strongly recommended that First Nations peoples “participate equally and equitably” and that new migrants be educated about Indigenous history. It specifically called for including Indigenous leaders on decision-making panels and for migrants to have formal learning about Australia's colonial legacy (Reconciliation Australia, 2023). This proposal reflects an increasing awareness: genuine inclusion means new settlers must learn Indigenous perspectives, not simply add to existing multicultural registers. Yet, this ideal meets challenges.

5.1. Systemic Inequities

First Nations communities bear disproportionate burdens in reconciliation efforts, often without adequate resourcing. Systemic inequities persist, for example, constitutional reform debates (Voice to Parliament) and treaty discussions have highlighted that many Australians remain uninformed or ambivalent about Indigenous issues. According to the 2023 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, while most of the Australians support reconciliation on principle, sizeable minorities still hold prejudices (Payne and Norman, 2024). Moreover, the Barometer and community surveys show that the *burden of reconciliation work falls heavily on Indigenous people*. Barolsky, Berger, and Close (2023) observe that community truth-telling initiatives are unequally borne by First Nations people without appropriate resourcing and support... clearly... unfair and unsustainable. In other words, Indigenous communities are often the drivers of reconciliation programs (through Reconciliation Action Plans, education, cultural events) while mainstream Australia remains passive or resistant.

This dynamic intersects with tokenism, we see many symbolic acts—Welcome-to-Country at events, Acknowledgement plaques, NAIDOC celebrations—that signal respect for Aboriginal cultures. But these often become rote, “feels-good” gestures that leave deeper structures intact. Critics note that Acknowledgements of Country, for example, can be treated as the sum of Indigenous recognition, when basic issues like land rights, justice, and truth-telling remain unaddressed. The same can be said for multicultural festivals that include Aboriginal dance groups as a token. Ongoing segregation also contradicts ideals: O’Donnell (2023) reports that Australia’s most ethnically diverse suburbs (e.g. Fairfield in Sydney) are also among the country’s most disadvantaged. These data point to a paradox: cultural diversity *exists* in solidarity within some enclaves, but often in spaces of entrenched poverty. If multicultural success is “not enjoyed by all (Aleem, 2020, 2023) then surface-level inclusion can mask underlying inequity.

5.2. Tokenism in Practice

Symbolic gestures, such as Welcome-to-Country ceremonies, frequently lack substantive follow-through on Indigenous rights. Language and policy reinforce tokenism. The recent Strategist article quotes Prime Minister Morrison framing multiculturalism/cohesion as a “*by-product*” of economic success (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020, 2021). This market-centric view places the onus on individuals (especially immigrants) to adapt learn English, find work, and *thus* become cohesive. It downplays structural change. In practice, many mainstream institutions expect migrants to integrate without significantly changing themselves. The RA submission explicitly counters this, calling for “anti-racism mechanisms” and federal support to fight exclusion. Likewise, the Australian Human Rights Commission notes that racism undermines cohesion. Yet national anti-racism policies have been slow to materialize (Reconciliation Australia, 2023).

5.3. Pathways to Substantive Reconciliation

Co-designed protocols and power-sharing mechanisms are proposed to move beyond performative inclusion. To make reconciliation substantive, we argue, Australia must move beyond tokenism to *power-sharing*. This means embedding Indigenous voices in governance (as in Treaty negotiations), fully resourcing community-led truth-telling, and rewriting educational narratives. It also means linking multicultural and reconciliation agendas: e.g., new migrants should engage in culturally safe orientations about First Peoples’ histories and voices. Some councils are pioneering such programs, but a coherent strategy is needed. As one RA workshop recommended,

councils should avoid “one size fits all” approaches and instead co-design initiatives with Aboriginal communities (Payne and Norman, 2024).

In sum, reconciliation is a growing tension line for social cohesion in Australia. Without addressing First Nations’ demands for sovereignty and justice, any celebration of multicultural harmony will ring hollow to Indigenous communities. The challenge is enormous: recent data indicate that while Australians do broadly support reconciliation, for many this support is still superficial (e.g. agreeing with multiculturalism in the abstract) (O’Donnell, 2023). Building true cohesion will require shifting resources and responsibility onto government and society at large, rather than expecting marginalized peoples to “represent” unity alone. Thus, we can argue that Cohesion must address colonial legacies, so, Barriers: 78% of councils initially struggled with meaningful Acknowledgement of Country protocols (Aleem, 2023). Also, Tokenism Risk, “A 2023 Welcoming Australia audit found 28% of council initiatives (n=76) limited Indigenous engagement to symbolic acts (e.g., Acknowledgement plaques), lacking resourced follow-through (Welcoming Australia, 2023, p. 41)”. While the Solution is Integrate Native Title resolutions into cohesion policies (Behrendt, 2019), and Data Integration is to address Indigenous reconciliation, Table 3 presents data on Indigenous inclusion in cohesion initiatives.

Table 3: Indigenous Engagement in Cohesion Programs (2020–2023)

Metric	2020	2023	Change
Councils with Indigenous Consultation Protocols	45%	72%	+27%
Funding for Indigenous-Led Cohesion Projects	\$2.5M	\$4.8M	+92%
Native Title Resolutions Incorporated	12%	25%	+13%

Source: Reconciliation Australia (2023); Welcoming Australia

This table shows progress in Indigenous engagement but highlights gaps in incorporating Native Title resolutions, aligning with the article’s call for reconciliation-focused cohesion policies.

Table 4: Public Support for Indigenous Reconciliation (2021–2023)

Years	Percentage of reconciliation
2021	56%
2022	60%
2023	63%

Source: Reconciliation Australia Annual Survey (2023).

This table underscores growing public support for reconciliation, supporting the article's argument that cohesion must prioritize Indigenous justice.

6. Reassessing Responsibility by Transitioning from Margins to Mainstream

A recurring theme is unequal responsibility. Often it is migrants, refugees, and minority communities that are tasked with demonstrating their value and fitting in. By contrast, majority institutions (large corporations, government agencies, media) often make only symbolic gestures or set assimilationist criteria (e.g. citizenship tests on *Australian values*) (O'Donnell, 2023). To rebalance, we propose a recalibration framework: majority actors must proactively create equitable conditions for cohesion.

6.1. Anti-Racism Enforcement

Policies must address systemic racism and promote equitable participation across institutions. Key elements of this framework include anti-racism enforcement, inclusive leadership, and structural reforms. Anti-racism policies should go beyond rhetoric. The Australian Human Rights Commission's 2021 Concept Paper for a National Anti-Racism Framework argues that measures to address racism must be paired with efforts to "*promote social cohesion, inclusion and equal opportunity and participation*" (Reconciliation Australia, 2023). This linkage is critical: every federal and state agency (including education, justice and health) should audit their practices for bias and inclusion. For example, ensuring equal housing and employment support for refugees and Indigenous people in disadvantaged suburbs would address one root cause of social fragmentation.

6.2. Inclusive Leadership

Diverse representation in decision-making panels and media is critical to normalizing inclusion. Leadership and visibility are also crucial. The RA submission recommends that First Nations representatives have direct roles on policy review panels (Reconciliation Australia, 2023). Similarly, diversity on corporate boards and media would normalize inclusion as a mainstream value. Diversity Council Australia's recent surveys highlight that marginalized workers still bear most of the "diversity burden" in organizations (Diversity Council Australia, 2023). This insight extends to society: majority groups should not expect minorities to carry the burden of educating or entertaining them. Government can help by funding intercultural education in schools, public education campaigns, and dialogue programs that actively involve long-settled Australians alongside new arrivals.

6.3. Redistributive Justice

Economic and social policies should target glaring inequities to strengthen trust and cohesion. A third element is redistributive justice. Social cohesion is undermined by glaring inequities. Data from Scanlon and others show that trust and sense of justice fall sharply where income and opportunity gaps widen (O'Donnell, 2023). Thus, governments should assess policies (welfare, labor, education) through a cohesion lens. For instance, training programs like Host Community Programs (council-led mentorships) should be scaled up nationally in both cities and regions. Housing policies should encourage mixed communities instead of concentrated enclaves. Economic plans should tie migrant placement to local labor needs, as some regional programs have shown success. Importantly, this means major institutions must internalize the “social” in social cohesion: e.g. employers should value diverse hiring not just as charity, but as creating stable workplaces.

6.4. Monitoring and Accountability

Public audits and biennial cohesion reports are recommended to track progress and refine strategies. In sum, public monitoring and accountability are needed. The Scanlon Foundation's ongoing Social Cohesion surveys (now rebranded as the Australian Cohesion Index) provide a rich evidence base (O'Donnell, 2023). Policymakers and community leaders should use this data to target interventions (for example, identifying regions with low belonging or high prejudice). Welcoming Cities itself demonstrates how benchmarking can drive progress: councils publicly report their accreditation results, fostering a norm of continuous improvement (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). A national equivalent—such as “Cities of Cohesion” awards or federal support for coalitions of businesses—could mirror this success.

In this reframing, inclusion is everyone's responsibility. Dominant groups and institutions must welcome change as much as newcomers do. As Aleem Ali put it, inclusive community-building cannot “exist in a vacuum... without addressing injustices and supporting self-determination” for all groups (Aleem, 2020, 2023). In practice, this means central governments, local councils, employers and educators must shift mindsets: from “we'll help them integrate” to “we will adapt to include them”. Thus, the evidence is Marginalized groups traditionally bear 78% of adaptation burdens (Diversity Council Australia, 2023), also the Progressive Model will be Dominant cultures lead bridging efforts (e.g., Hume Council's "Host Community Program" boosted migrant employment by 41%), and Institutions provide scaffolding (e.g., survival knowledge transfers like

climate adaptation guidance). Therefore, the Data Integration in Table 5 quantifies the impact of responsibility recalibration.

Table 5: Impact of Host Community Programs (2020–2023)

Metric	Baseline (2020)	Post-Program (2023)	Change
Migrant Employment (Hume Council)	55%	78%	+41%
Community-Led Initiatives Funded	120	210	+75%
Dominant Group Participation	25%	48%	+23%

Source: Diversity Council Australia (2023); Hume Council Annual Report (2023).

This table demonstrates the effectiveness of shifting responsibility to dominant groups, as seen in Hume Council’s success in migrant employment. Furthermore, Australia’s social cohesion future hinges on: Hybrid Policies merging multiculturalism with equity-based cohesion; Indigenous-Centered Frameworks, ensuring reconciliation precedes migrant inclusion; and Phased Implementation, prioritizing long-term community ownership over short-term symbolism. Therefore, the Data Integration: Table 6 summarizes Australia’s cohesion trajectory.

Table 6: Social Cohesion Trends (2018–2023)

Year	Social Cohesion Score
2018	77
2019	78
2020	76
2021	79
2022	80
2023	81

Source: Scanlon Foundation (2023).

This table shows a positive trend, reinforcing the article’s optimism about phased, equity-focused approaches. Future research should explore transnational comparisons (e.g., Canadian multiculturalism vs. Australian cohesion models).

7. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

Key insights reveal that social cohesion in Australia requires integrating multicultural recognition with justice-oriented policies and Indigenous reconciliation. Our expanded analysis indicates that social cohesion is an ongoing project, necessitating deliberate, justice-focused approaches

alongside openness to diversity. Specifically, social cohesion and multiculturalism overlap but are not identical; local initiatives like Welcoming Cities demonstrate promise in translating diversity into cohesion; and Indigenous reconciliation and anti-racism must be integrated into cohesion strategies. Building on these findings, we propose the following policy recommendations for an inclusive nation-building framework:

7.1. Policy Recommendations

To strengthen social cohesion in Australia, we propose the following evidence-based strategies: First, embed commitments from the Uluru Statement, such as the Voice to Parliament, into the Constitution; integrate Indigenous history into education and migrant orientation programs; and fund local truth-telling initiatives led by Indigenous communities. Second, develop a national social cohesion strategy with measurable targets using Scanlon Index metrics, linking funding to progress in belonging, trust, and equity, while expanding initiatives like Welcoming Cities and anti-racism efforts. Third, reform the Racial Discrimination Act to address modern hate speech, mandate annual equity audits for public services, and ensure laws uphold equal opportunity and participation for all. Additionally, increase funding for Welcoming Cities, especially in regional areas, encourage councils and businesses to implement Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs), and adapt successful models for engaging migrant and Indigenous youth. Finally, expand community dialogue programs nationwide, enhance school and university curricula on multiculturalism and civic participation, conduct biennial Social Cohesion Audits using Scanlon Index and ABS data, and partner with universities to refine inclusive indicators while addressing emerging issues like anti-immigrant sentiment with data-driven policies.

7.2. Concluding Summary and Future Directions

This study proposes a recalibration framework for social cohesion in Australia, emphasizing institutional responsibility, Indigenous-centered multiculturalism, and place-based governance. Looking ahead, future research should explore transnational comparisons and scalable models to validate the framework's adaptability across diverse contexts. By shifting the burden of inclusion from marginalized communities to dominant institutions—governments, corporations, and civic leaders—Australia can foster a more equitable and resilient society.

The framework responds to pressing national priorities, including rising migration, reconciliation efforts post-Voice Referendum, and the expansion of Welcoming Cities, which now encompass 40% of the population. It also situates Australia's challenges within global trends, countering

exclusionary nationalism through economic participation and inclusive policy design. Comparative insights from Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US highlight both strengths and gaps in Australia's approach, particularly in Indigenous consultation and statutory accountability.

Ultimately, the recalibration framework offers a hybrid model—combining multiculturalism, truth-telling, and local governance—that holds promise for international policy transfer. By grounding cohesion strategies in justice and pragmatism, Australia can lead by example, demonstrating how diversity and belonging can reinforce one another to build a unified, inclusive nation.

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