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Professor
**Fethi
Mansouri**

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Melbourne is one of the most diverse cities on planet earth. Its population is made up of 140 cultures ranging from the original Indigenous communities to recent migrants from countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. Ensuring that people from so many different backgrounds live together harmoniously can be challenging.

Professor Fethi Mansouri is ideally placed and expertly qualified to help Melbournians navigate the shifting face of the city's changing demographics. He is the Director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University, holds the UNESCO Chair in comparative research on 'Cultural Diversity and Social Justice' and the Alfred Deakin Research Chair in migration and intercultural studies.

'The issue of diversity is part and parcel of my life story thus far. I grew up in Tunisia speaking Arabic, French, Italian and English and I spent two and a half years in China learning Mandarin. I wanted to pursue diversity and intercultural relations as part of my work and these have been intrinsic to what I have been doing academically since my undergraduate days,' says Mansouri.



“ We need to make multiculturalism relevant for the 21st century, relevant for the diversity that we have right now and the external pressure points that are coming to bear on our society. ”

Professor Mansouri is now focused on ensuring that multiculturalism, as pursued and implemented in Australia, continues to be a leading example to a world that is experiencing enormous divisions.

Through the Alfred Deakin Institute, Professor Mansouri recently completed the Doing Diversity Project on behalf of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. It examined the current state of multiculturalism in Australia through stakeholder consultations and a large survey of the public's attitudes towards multiculturalism. The researchers found that most Australians feel positively



toward multiculturalism and believe it has a very important role to play in our society. But if you look beneath the surface deep fissures are revealed.

‘It is alarming that at least 20 per cent of Australians have suffered racism and at least five per cent have suffered physical abuse that was racially motivated,’ says Mansouri.

This is not totally surprising considering the insecurities people are feeling at present in terms of housing affordability, job security and national security.

‘There are always migrant communities that some within mainstream society believe are unable to integrate and view as a burden or a threat to our society. That is one of the main reasons people use to justify negative, even racist, attitudes towards other groups.’

‘In my work I am exploring alternative policy options to counteract that type of thinking. Originally, multiculturalism aimed to help migrants assimilate while allowing them to retain elements of their culture, but as the face of diversity changes and becomes more complex, it is no longer possible to sustain multiculturalism without involving mainstream society.’

“ Interculturalism focuses on the universal values that we share – human dignity, respect, inclusion and acceptance. ”

‘We need to make multiculturalism relevant for the 21st century, relevant for the diversity that we have right now and the external pressure points that are coming to bear on our society, be it globalisation or terrorism,’ says Mansouri.

This is where interculturalism (intercultural dialogue) comes into play. While multiculturalism focuses on groups and provides room for people to preserve their culture, interculturalism focuses on the universal values that we share – human dignity, respect, inclusion and acceptance. It is a process that requires active participation from all sections of the community.



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‘Ultimately we can only overcome the deep fissures in society when we accept that we all need to embrace change. It starts with education.

We need to train people in intercultural dialogue at a local level, embed it into schools, local governments and the media,’ says Mansouri.

‘Deakin was approached to work in this area because we conduct research that has immediate relevance to our communities. Our research actually touches people's lives, and changes and improves the way things are done in our society,’ he says. ‘No one gains when we discriminate against certain communities. Through our work we want to bring people closer together and maximise the benefits of diversity.’

This work helps create a community that is more peaceful, accepting and prosperous economically, culturally and spiritually. Living in a harmonious, inclusive and safe society will produce better citizens who care for one another and overcome their difficulties in peaceful ways.

‘The goal is to create a society where no one suffers physical or verbal abuse because of their race or faith, a society in which kids can go to school without fear of being bullied because of how they look, how their names sound or how they speak’.

‘Interculturalism is a tool that can be used to negotiate difficult issues that can arise between different cultures,’ says Mansouri.

Professor Mansouri points to the recent problems with the development of a mosque in Bendigo as an example where intercultural dialogue can be beneficial.

The negative reaction to the mosque may have been averted if the council had brought the members of various communities together to discuss and deliberate the issue with the help of a facilitator trained in intercultural dialogue.