

# Human rights in the community

With the ongoing backdrop of COVID-19, human rights discussion in the community is at its highest level for many years. Human rights are impacted every day when emergency public health orders limit movement inter or intra-state and mandate vaccines, social distancing, and wearing masks. During these unprecedented times, Queensland has been fortunate to have the framework of the *Human Rights Act 2019* to guide these challenging discussions.

## Measuring human rights attitudes

Two recent studies provide some indication of human rights literacy in Queensland. The first was conducted in early 2021 by Amnesty International with a sample of 1,600 people of various ages, genders, and locations across Australia.<sup>114</sup> Some of the general findings included:

- The rights of most importance to people surveyed included the right to vote (86%), freedom from discrimination (84%), right to free speech (83%) and right to equal treatment before the law (83%).
- 36% of people surveyed thought that Indigenous Australians had fewer opportunities than non-Indigenous Australians.
- People surveyed believed that the following groups were most in need of protection of their rights, in order of priority: Indigenous people, refugees, ethnic minorities, immigrants and women.
- 76% of people surveyed wanted national human rights legislation.

More recently, a Queensland study by Griffith University researchers found overwhelming support for human rights, the *Human Rights Act 2019*, and the Commission. The study,<sup>115</sup> conducted in July 2021, surveyed a randomised sample of 1,000 people living in Queensland. Some key findings included that:

- The priority areas for Queenslanders were child protection, health, aged care, and disability rights.
- The attitudes towards human rights were overall similar between Brisbane and regional Queensland.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people responded that human rights were less respected in regions.

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<sup>114</sup> Amnesty International Australia, '2021 Human Rights Barometer: What are Australians current attitudes to their rights and the rights of others?', *Amnesty International Australia* (PDF, 8 August 2021).

<sup>115</sup> Eddie Ngaluafe, 'Griffith News: Most Queenslanders support human rights – survey finds', *Griffith University* (22 September 2021).

- Women were less sure that human rights were being respected than men, especially in health care.
- The age group that was the least supportive of human rights were people over 65.
- Scepticism about effectiveness of human rights protections was higher amongst people on lower incomes.

## Attitudes to COVID-19 and human rights

Attitudes to rights limitations during COVID-19 indicated strong support for measures required to slow the spread, with 73% agreeing in the Amnesty study that restrictions on rights were worth it. In the Griffith University study, when asked about Queensland Government's approach to COVID-19, 64% believed that human rights had been respected during the pandemic.

## Knowledge about rights protections

While human rights consciousness is growing, this may not translate to a strong understanding of what legal protections are in place. More than half of respondents to the Amnesty study believed that Australia already had a federal Human Rights Act – which is not the case. While 91% of respondents to the Queensland study thought that protection of human rights and dignity is important, only 43% knew about the Queensland *Human Rights Act 2019*.

While the Act only commenced in its entirety in January 2020, it is clear that more community education is required to improve human rights literacy in the community.

# Community education

Community education is critical to ensuring that the Act meets the goals of protecting and promoting human rights culture and promoting a dialogue about the nature, meaning and scope of human rights.<sup>116</sup>

The Commission's website remained a key source of information for the community about their rights. In 2020-21, 6 of the 20 most visited pages on the Commission's website were human rights specific.

The huge increase in enquiries and complaints has resulted in a backlog of complaints, which necessitated significant Commission resources being directed to complaint management and resolution. This has meant a decreased capacity in the Commission to lead the important work of promoting the understanding and acceptance of human rights and the Act in Queensland.<sup>117</sup>

Traditional community engagement opportunities have been limited during COVID-19 with many events being cancelled or moved to an online space, particularly in South-East Queensland. Despite all of this, the Commission ran number of successful engagements in Brisbane and the regions.

## Commission engagement activities

### Townsville Youth Human Rights Forum

The Forum was a partnership between the Commission and Townsville City Council Youth Council. The aims of the event were to:

- provide a positive platform for Townsville area youth to engage and contribute
- build an understanding of human rights and to raise awareness of the Human Rights Act
- explore young people's views about human rights issues in the Townsville community and generate ideas to address them, and
- stimulate thinking and identify actions that participants can take to promote an inclusive community where everyone feels welcome and connected.

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<sup>116</sup> *Human Rights Act 2019* s 3(a) and (c).

<sup>117</sup> *Human Rights Act 2019* s 61(d).

Interest in the event was strong, with 75 young people registering to attend. Participants heard from three speakers: a local businesswoman with disability, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander man who is a passionate advocate for Indigenous youth, and a young person from a refugee background. The rest of the event centred around hosted conversations in which young people were given a voice on human rights, social justice, and their local community.

Due to the success of this event, the Commission is considering ways to replicate the event in other locations throughout Queensland.

In Brisbane, the Commission participated in a panel discussion for Queensland Health Metro North Alcohol and Drug Service's Culturally and Linguistically Diverse working group on the impact of COVID-19 on 7 July 2021. Discussions centred around the right to health services, right to life and equality before the law, and the importance of delivering timely information in different languages to ensure all communities understand the risks and the necessary precautions. Further discussions were about how CALD communities could be exposed to police intervention based on lack of understanding of legal obligations, as well as the right to practice their religion which had been due to health restrictions.

The Cairns team ran a number of engagements about human rights, including:

- On 11 August 2020, the Commission presented the results of a community survey relating to increases in racist behaviour and incidents toward people of Asian descent in the Cairns area. The well-attended event was presented in conjunction with the Queensland Police Service and included a session on the Human Rights Act and obligations on public entities.
- On 25 May 2021, the Commission delivered an address to the ordinary Council meeting for Cairns Regional Council as part of Reconciliation Week. The theme of the address was, 'Reconciliation takes Action' and used links between the Human Rights Act and the Council's Reconciliation Action Plan to urge Council to understand their obligations under the Act to work towards real and meaningful reconciliation.
- On the 8 June 2021, the Commission made a presentation at the Diversity and Inclusion Forum in Cairns. The topic included adopting a human rights based approach to work in the sector. The audience included workers in the aged care industry, allied health, and medical professionals.

- Throughout the year the Commission continued to support the Space and Place Youth Activities for Cairns, and linked initiatives through adding a human rights-based lens to projects and helping to build community capacity around the Act.

The Rockhampton team was involved in a number of events that promoted human rights and equal opportunity including:

- The multi-faith dinner, hosted by the Queensland Police Service in partnership with Multicultural Australia, the Queensland Human Rights Commission, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services, and Rockhampton Regional Council. The dinner aims to build on existing community relationships through dialogue and partnerships and focuses on community and religious leaders being seen standing together and promoting the shared values of all faiths. It allows government and other agency representatives to sit down and share a meal with community leaders from our diverse community. This was the fifth year of the event and hosted over 100 people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.
- Neighbour Day: This event encourages social connection and is an opportunity to provide information about household preparedness for people with a disability, their families, and carers. The objectives for this event are to strengthen community connections and create awareness of the additional challenges people with disability face in times of emergency and natural disasters.
- The Commission presented at the joint Central Queensland Multicultural Association and Multicultural Australia Harmony Day celebrations.

The Commission's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Unit travelled to Mount Isa and met with community to discuss human rights issues as well as delivering training on the Act. The Unit has also delivered human rights training sessions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander shire councils, government and non-government agencies, and First Nations communities.

## Human Rights Month

For the sixth consecutive year, we ran our Human Rights Month campaign from 10 November culminating on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2020. The COVID pandemic restricted how the campaign was delivered this year to taking place mostly online.

The campaign aimed to increase the community's awareness of the new Human Rights Act, and included daily 'right in focus' posts on the Commission's social media platforms to draw attention to individual human rights. We also provided training for key audiences across the month, both online and in person, and developed a supporter kit for stakeholders.

## Training for advocates

In late 2020, the Commission introduced new training products for advocates to support vulnerable Queenslanders in accessing protections available to them under the *Human Rights Act 2019*. The range includes individual products tailored for community advocates, legal advocates, and self-advocates. The intention is to assist those who assist the community to better understand their rights and how the Act can be used to address human rights issues.

In the reporting period:

- 29 sessions were conducted for community advocates
- 7 sessions were conducted for legal advocates, and
- 2 sessions were conducted for self-advocates.