



Australian Government



MEDIA RELEASE

Seeing Ourselves on-screen: Screen Australia report reveals progress for diversity in Australian TV drama

Friday 14 April 2023: Screen Australia has released new research into diversity on Australian screens, titled *Seeing Ourselves 2: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Australian TV Drama*. A follow up to the [landmark 2016 study](#), *Seeing Ourselves 2* examines the diversity of main characters in 361 scripted Australian TV and online dramas broadcast between 2016 and 2021, how this compares to the Australian population, and what has changed since the previous *Seeing Ourselves* report.

The report shows that there have been increases in the levels of diversity since 2016 including higher representation for First Nations people (7.2% from 4.8%), disabled people (6.6% from 3.6%), LGBTIQ+¹ people (7.4% from 4.5%), and non-European people (16% from 6.9%). However, a number of Australia's communities remain under-represented on-screen compared to population benchmarks and in particular disability representation remains critically low.

Minister for the Arts, Tony Burke said, "Australian drama on screen is compelling and powerful. It's a cornerstone of how Australians see themselves, learn about each other and how the world comes to know us. It shouldn't be too much to ask that when you watch Australian screen, it looks like modern Australia."

Screen Australia's CEO, Graeme Mason said, "It's vital that Australian screen stories authentically reflect the diversity of our nation, and we know that the screen industry is becoming more aware of the cultural and commercial value of creating diverse content. It's great to see improvements since 2016, however these results show that the overall pace of progress is slow and there is a long way to go to reach genuine representation of Australia's diverse communities on screen."

"Authenticity and inclusivity are a core consideration in all of our work at Screen Australia, and are why we invested in this new *Seeing Ourselves* report. This research serves to shine a light on the current landscape, and we hope it will inform, educate and influence decision-making across the whole sector. We know more action is needed to bring about transformative change and collaboration will be essential. We look forward to working with the sector to achieve greater representation in the Australian screen industry."

The report provides the industry with key findings that show the gaps in representation on-screen and some of the challenges faced by practitioners in the sector.

¹ LGBTIQ+ is the acronym used in this report referring to people with diverse sexual orientations and/or gender identities. This reflects ABS 2021, [Standard for Sex, Gender, Variations of Sex Characteristics and Sexual Orientation Variables, 2020](#).

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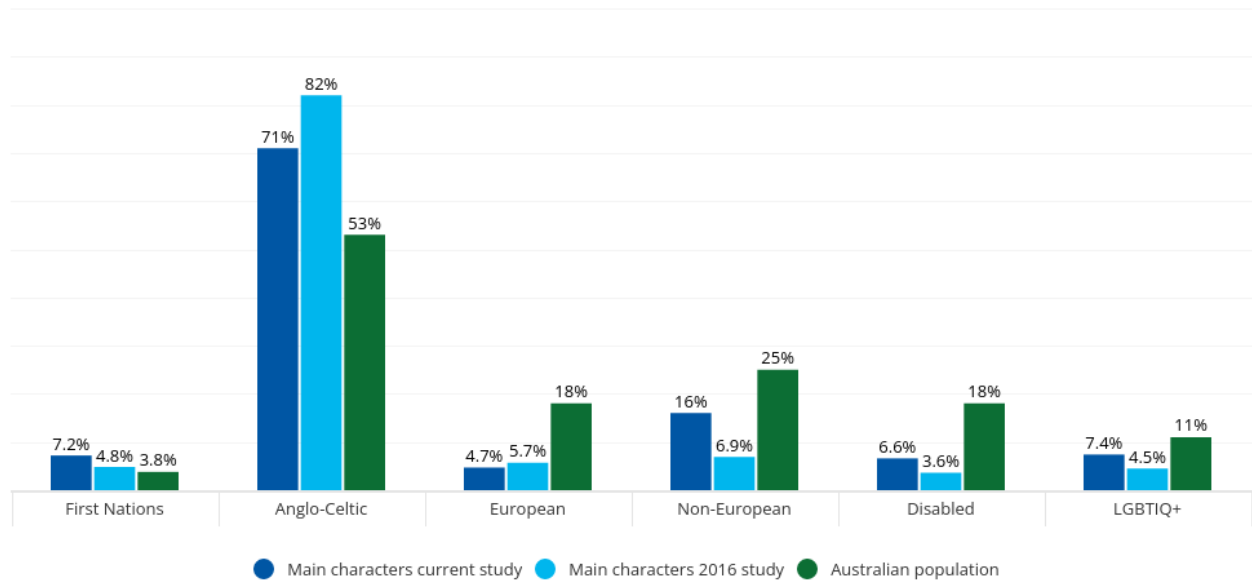


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Instagram

Figure 1: Diversity of main characters compared to the Australian population, 2016 results and current study



Based on 3,072 characters across 361 TV dramas broadcast 2016 to 2021 in the current study and 1,961 characters across 199 TV dramas broadcast 2011 to 2015 in the 2016 study.

METHOD

In part 1 of the report, Screen Australia examined 3,072 main characters in 361 scripted Australian TV dramas, including children’s dramas and comedies. The titles examined were commissioned and first released between 2016 and 2021 on free-to-air or subscription TV, streaming or online services available in Australia. These main characters were analysed by cultural background, disability, gender, sexual orientation, occupational status and two new variables: age and location, as well as how these different aspects of diversity intersect. Results were then compared to the previous Seeing Ourselves report and 2021 Census data on the population where possible.

To reflect changes in audience viewing behaviour over the past six years, the scope of the report has been expanded since the 2016 report to go beyond broadcast TV and also includes commissioned content on streaming and online services.

Part 2 of the report provides results from interviews with the industry, offering their insights into the opportunities, challenges and barriers experienced by those involved in bringing diverse stories and characters to the screen. It includes consultations with 35 participants across 23 industry and diversity, equity and inclusion organisations and in-depth interviews with 28 key stakeholders including diverse screen practitioners and people working on diverse stories.

RESULTS: FIRST NATIONS

The study found that the level of First Nations representation on screen is strong, increasing from 4.8% of main characters in the previous study to 7.2%, compared to the population benchmark of 3.8%.

Screen Australia’s Head of First Nations **Angela Bates** said, “For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be able to see ourselves represented on screen in shows such as [Mystery Road](#), [Total Control](#) and [Black Comedy](#), is powerful. This result shows good progress and it’s not by accident - it represents years of advocacy and consistent hard work to ensure our practitioners feel supported and are afforded opportunities in an industry that hasn’t always been accessible. It’s proof of what’s possible when we are empowered to tell stories from our perspective - it translates to screen and gives credibility to stories in a way that can’t be replicated, slowly breaking down stereotypes and barriers, which is extremely validating. While more work



needs to be done, the positive impact that seeing ourselves on screens has on entire communities cannot be underestimated, and all Australians benefit because it adds so much more cultural richness to our screens.”

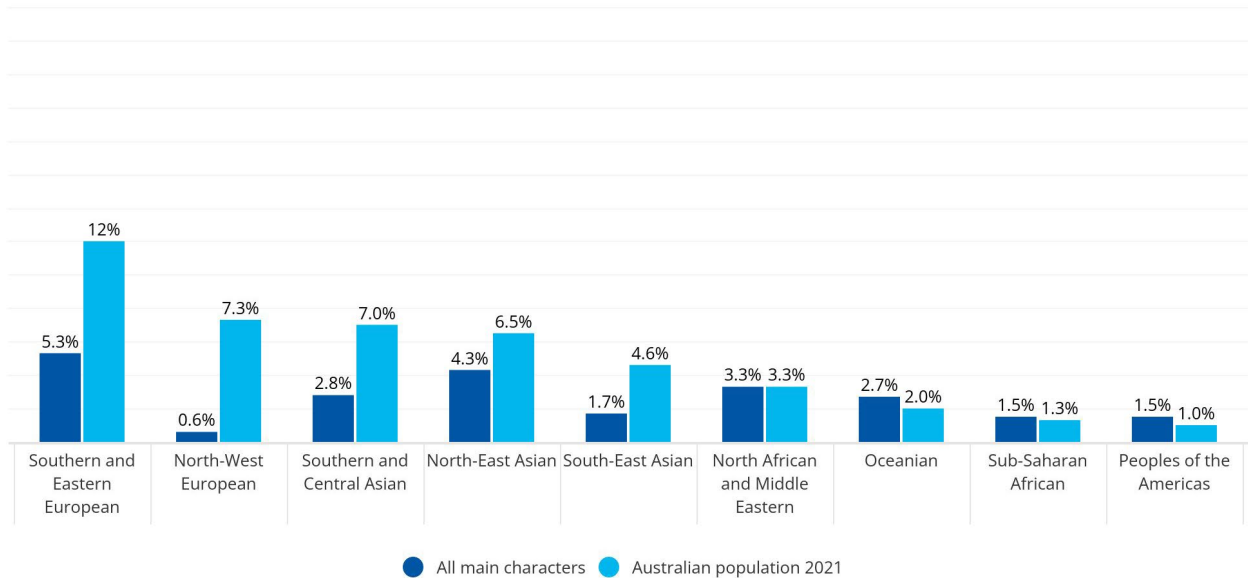
RESULTS: CULTURAL BACKGROUND (NON-FIRST NATIONS)

Although 53% of the Australian population have Anglo-Celtic ancestry, they represented 71% of main characters in this study. This is down from 82% in 2016, suggesting the industry has made efforts to increase the cultural diversity in the main characters on our screens.

For the purpose of this report and to allow for comparison with the 2016 report, top-level findings for cultural background has been grouped into ‘Anglo-Celtic’, ‘European’ and ‘non-European’², mirroring key waves of migration to Australia. The share of non-European main characters (for example, those with Indian, Chinese or Middle Eastern ancestry) has more than doubled from 6.9% to 16%. However, this is still lower than the population benchmark of 25%. Within this, the report also looks at more detailed cultural groups as represented in the graph below.

One in four TV dramas feature all Anglo-Celtic main characters, down from one in three in the previous study.

Figure 6: Deeper dive into European and non-European representation among main characters compared to the Australian population, allowing for multiple ancestries



Based on 3,072 characters across 361 TV dramas broadcast 2016 to 2021. Australian population based on ABS Census 2021. Allows for multiple ancestries.

RESULTS: DISABILITY

The rate of disability representation among main characters has improved, but from a low base. Disability remains very much under-represented in TV drama (6.6%, up from 3.6% in the previous study) compared to the Australian population (18%).

The report found that nearly three quarters of programs did not feature any disabled main characters, an improvement from the 90% reported in 2016. This indicates that more work needs to be done so that disabled people are included as main characters in our screen stories.

² The term ‘Non-European’ is based on categorisation from Australian Human Rights Commission 2018, *Leading for Change: A blueprint for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership revisited*.

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RESULTS: GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The gender of main characters was evenly split between women and men, similar to the Australian population. There were 13 characters who are transgender (0.4% of main characters) and five who are non-binary (0.2%). At the time of preparing this report, there were no population statistics for people who are trans and/or gender diverse.

Representation of LGBTIQ+ characters has increased to 7.4%, up from 4.5% in 2016. This is still lower than the estimated 11% of the population who identify as LGBTIQ+. The report found that 69% of programs did not feature any LGBTIQ+ characters, a slight improvement from 73% in 2016.

RESULTS: AGE AND OCCUPATIONAL STATUS

The study found that Australian TV dramas tend to feature younger adults, with 62% of main characters aged between 18-44 years. There is under-representation of main characters aged under 12 (2.2% compared to population benchmark of 15%) and only 7% aged 60 and over, much lower than 23% of the population in this age group.

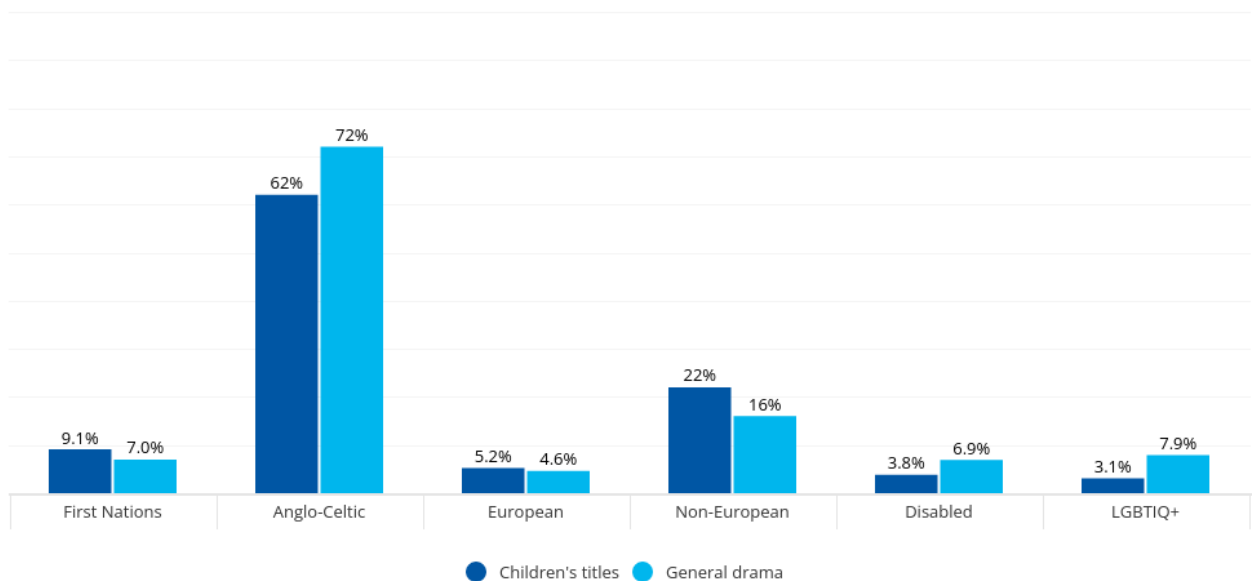
Main characters in TV drama are more likely to have higher occupational status than the Australian population, suggesting a bias towards socioeconomic advantage on our screens. The research also revealed that First Nations, non-European and disabled characters are less likely to be represented in higher skill level occupations.

RESULTS: DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN’S DRAMA

Children’s programs have a higher level of cultural diversity than general drama, and this has increased since 2016 in terms of First Nations representation (9.1%) and characters from non-European backgrounds (22%). However, levels of disability (3.8%) and LGBTIQ+ representation (3.1%) are much lower among children’s titles compared to general TV drama titles.

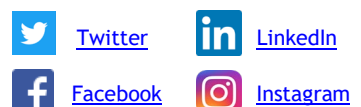
Graeme Mason said, “Australian children’s drama is world-renowned, and we’re proud to see successful shows with authentic representation such as *First Day* and *Hardball* winning not only the hearts of viewers but also International Emmy Awards. We know that diverse children’s programming resonates with audiences here and overseas, and we want to see even more of this on our screens.”

Figure 21: Diversity of main characters, children’s titles versus general drama titles



Based on 287 characters across 38 children's titles and 2,785 characters across 323 general drama titles broadcast 2016 to 2021.

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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The results of the industry consultation conducted for this report revealed experiences of significant barriers to improving both on-screen representation and diversity and inclusion off screen in production teams, writers' rooms and key decision-making and commissioning roles.

The in-depth qualitative research shows a push within the industry for:

- Centring lived experience and genuine collaboration in telling authentic stories. This includes having stories led by or told in genuine collaboration with people with lived experience, and getting more diverse voices into writing rooms and on set. The feedback also showed that it's important to avoid persistent stereotypes and tokenism and to tell specific stories about characters' personal experiences, rather than trying to portray a whole community.
- Increasing diverse representation throughout the screen industry and at all career stages; including having more diverse people on crews and in leadership positions, and supporting the careers of under-represented talent through a network of champions and mentors and structured attachment programs.
- Improving cultural safety and accessibility across the screen industry, driven by culturally competent commissioners, producers and key creatives. Along with professional education and training about cultural safety and accessibility, creatives can also educate themselves to alleviate the burden on under-represented practitioners to educate production teams.

Graeme Mason said, "We thank everyone who has contributed to this report. The wheels of change are in motion but there is a lot more work to do to achieve diversity on our screens that is both authentic and creatively and commercially fulfilling. We also know this is a global issue, and there's a growing push around the world for all people to be able to see themselves represented onscreen. This report provides international context in Part 3 by comparing similar research with the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand. While our on-screen results compare favourably with some of our peers on several metrics - such as our strong First Nations and women's on-screen representation - other jurisdictions are ahead of the game in terms of taking action and implementing whole of sector strategies. We can learn from these countries as we look at ways to pick up the pace of change in our local industry."

"We encourage the industry to utilise this report, including the tools and resources within it, and we hope it will arm and empower screen professionals to address their specific areas of concern," **Mason** said.

RESOURCES

- The full report is available [here](#).
- An Easy Read version of the Executive Summary and an Auslan video are available [here](#).
- Tools and Resources listed in Part 4 of the report are available [here](#).
- Download high-resolution images from the report [here](#).

ABOUT SCREEN AUSTRALIA

Screen Australia is the Australian Federal Government agency that supports the development, production and promotion of Australian scripted and documentary content. The agency invests directly in Australian film, television, online titles and games. It also supports First Nations stories and practitioners through its First Nations Department. In 2021/22, Screen Australia provided more than \$100 million to the sector.

The agency provides a range of resources and opportunities to the industry including access to research, market intelligence sector-building programs such as Enterprise and special initiatives including Gender Matters. Screen Australia represents Australia's screen industry internationally, including at festivals, markets and major awards. The agency also tracks and reports on industry health, maintains a database of Australian titles called The Screen Guide and provides free industry resources via Screen News. For more information visit screenaustralia.gov.au.

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