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# UNIT 1 AUSTRALIA: LAND AND PEOPLE

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### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the mid-20th Century, Australia was considered to be a land of cultural and topographical unity. It was known for its remarkable unity in most of its features especially when being compared to Europe with its mosaic of different nationalities erecting barriers against each other. It is only in recent years that there has been an increasing awareness of the changing composition and diversity of the population. Modern Australia had begun as a penal colony of the British in 1788 with a very small number of free settlers. Over the years and with the consolidation of settlement along the eastern coast, the rapid expansion of the British woollen industry led to the rapid subjugation of its indigenous inhabitants and most of the vast expanse of land. Today, the Aboriginal groups have been recognised as distinct peoples and efforts are made to undo the wrongs of the past. Moreover, the increasing inflow of immigrants from all parts of the world has resulted in Australia evolving as a multicultural nation.

Sometimes referred to as the land 'down under', Australia is located southeast of Asia in the southern hemisphere. It is the world's largest island (and smallest continent) sharing no borders with other countries and covering an area of 7,713,360 square kilometres (2,978,145 square miles). The island together with the adjacent Torres Strait island and island of Tasmania forms the Commonwealth of Australia. Australia is divided up into six states and three territories. The six states are: New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. The three territories are the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Northern Territory and Jervis Bay Territory.

The focus of this Unit is on the land and people of Australia and is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the physical features of the Australian landmass and its different climatic

systems. The second section on the Australian people, apart from giving a descriptive account of the population profile, attempts to give the student a feel of what it is like to be an Australian.

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## 1.2 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the main topographic features of Australia;
- delineate the main characteristics of the Australian population;
- understand the ethnic and cultural complexity of Australian society; and
- define the broad contours of Australian national identity.

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## 1.3 TOPOGRAPHY

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Australia does not have very high mountains and consists mostly of large plains. The interior of Australia is relatively flat except for the remnants of some eroded mountain chains. Australia can be regarded as a landscape of broad swells, varied by a number of sedimentary basins (Murray, Gippsland, Eucla, Carpentaria, Lake Eyre and other basins). These slowly filled up and some are now sources of coal or oil. There are no young folded mountains in Australia, no active volcanoes and no large rivers. A large mountain chain called the Great Dividing Range extends along the eastern coast of Australia. Low lying coastal plains in the east, southeast and southwest are the most densely settled areas of Australia. Along the north eastern coast of Australia is the Great Barrier Reef, the largest known coral formation in the world. This chain of reefs extends for 2,012 kilometres (1,250 miles) along the coast.

Unlike Europe and North America, where much of the landscape dates back to 20,000 years ago (when great ice sheets retreated), the age of landforms in Australia is generally measured in many millions of years. Because of this great age, Australia is also known as the "fossil continent" but most of its current physical features have resulted from recent geological movements: the constant invasion of the sea has left sand, shells and clay, the arid climate produced dry river courses and dunes and the monotonously uniform plains have been elevated in the east, more in the south than in the north. However the southwestern uplift was much less than the southeast.

Earth movements, it is said, have caused the broad shape of Australia, but most of the detail is carved by river erosion. Many of Australia's rivers drain inland; while they may be eroding their valleys near their highland sources, their lower courses are filling up with alluvium, and the rivers often end in salt lakes which are dry for most of the time. Other rivers reach the sea, and have dissected a broad near-coast region into plateaus, hills and valleys. Many of the features of the drainage pattern of Australia have a very long history, and some individual valleys have maintained their position for hundreds of millions of years. The salt lakes of the Yilgarn Plateau in Western Australia are the remnants of a drainage pattern that was active before continental drift separated Australia from Antarctica.

During the last ice age, the sea level was over 100 metres lower than it is today, and rivers cut down to this low level. When the sea level rose again, the lower valleys were drowned. Some make fine harbours (e.g. Sydney Harbour), whilst others have tended to fill with alluvium, making the typical lowland valleys around the Australian coast.

The offshore shape of Australia, revealed in isobath contours, results mainly from the pattern of

break-up of the super-continent of which Australia was once a part. There is a broad continental shelf around most of Australia, bounded by a steeper continental slope, except in New South Wales where the continental shelf is very narrow. A broad plateau on which the Great Barrier Reef has grown in only the last two million years bound the Queensland coast. In South Australia, submarine canyons have grooved the continental shelf.

The Australian landforms of today seem to have resulted from long-continued processes in a unique setting, giving rise to typical Australian landscapes, which in turn provide the physical basis for the distribution and nature of biological and human activity in Australia.

Australia, then, can be divided into three physiographic regions: the Great Western Plateau, the Central Eastern Lowlands and the Eastern Highland belt along with marginal depressions of various sizes which have been frequently invaded by the sea. Australia is the lowest, flattest and (apart from Antarctica) the driest of the continents. This fact gives Australia a very distinctive physical geography.

### **1.3.1 The Great Western Plateau**

The Western Plateau consists of almost two-thirds of the entire Australian continent and contains most of its deserts, salt lakes and mines. It consists of very old rocks (some over 3,000 million years old), and much of it has existed as a landmass for over 500 million years. Several parts have individual 'plateau' names (e.g. Kimberley, Hammersley, Arnhem Land, Yilgarn). In the Perth area, younger rocks along a coastal strip are separated from the rest by the Darling Fault escarpment. The Nullarbor Plain is virtually an uplifted sea floor, a limestone plain of Miocene age (about 25 million years). The absence of mountains except for some scattered ranges is what explains its climate and river systems. These ranges are locally prominent and include famous monoliths like the Ayer's rock and Mt. Olga.

Arid landscapes are predominant part of the plateau. This is caused by wind erosion, extremes of temperatures and water action on a parched surface, which splits the surface rocks. Salt lakes are prevalent in the interior of Western Australia concentrated towards the southwest, a result of low rainfall, high evaporation and no permanently flowing rivers. Evaporation of shallow water after an occasional rain leaves fine deposits of salt and gypsum, which slowly accumulates, to a thick crust. Salt lakes occur in many low positions, in places following lines of ancient drainage. They are often associated with lunettes, dunes formed on the downwind side of lakes. Many important finds of Aboriginal pre-history have been made in lunettes. Despite the prevalence of arid conditions today, the real aridity seems to be geologically young, with no dunes or salt lakes older than a million years. Another feature of this landscape is the sand ridge desert that occurs in the Great Sandy, Gibson and Simpson Desert in central lowland Australia. Sand dunes are mostly longitudinal, following the dominant wind directions of a high-pressure cell. The dunes are mostly fixed now. Stony deserts or gibber plains (covered with small stones or 'gibbers') are areas without any sand cover and occupy a larger area than the dune fields.

The lack of surface and underground water stands out as two-thirds of the area is completely without rivers. Only in the southwest are there short permanently flowing streams. Hence it is no surprise that few parts of the Great Western Plateau encourage human settlement except the south-western region because of the small streams and the climate. Another feature which encourages settlement elsewhere in the western plateau is the presence of a wide variety ore deposits leading to mining. The principal deposits are silver, lead and zinc, gold, copper, iron ore and other minor deposits like tin, molybdenum, titanium, tantalum, tungsten, and asbestos. There is not much coal except in the south-western region where it is mined.

### **1.3.2 The Central Eastern Lowlands**

The Central Lowlands stretch from the Gulf of Carpentaria through the Great Artesian Basin to the Murray-Darling Plains. The Great Artesian Basin is filled with sedimentary rocks, which hold water that enters in the wetter Eastern Uplands. It is mostly 800 feet or less in height and covers the western and central parts of Queensland and New South Wales together with smaller portions of Northern Territory and South Australia.

Much of the central Australia is flat, but there are numerous ranges (e.g. Macdonnell, Musgrave) and some individual mountains of which Uluru is the best known. Faulting and folding in this area took place long ago, the area was worn to a plain, and the plain uplifted and then eroded to form the modern ranges on today's plain. However, much of the area is only formed by featureless plains.

In the South Australian part of the Central Lowlands fault movements are more recent, and the area can be considered as a number of blocks that have been moved up and down to form a series of 'ranges' (Mt Lofty, Flinders Ranges) and 'hills' (such as the Adelaide Hills), with the down faulted blocks occupied by sea (e.g. Spencer Gulf) or lowlands including the lower Murray Plains.

A mention should be made here of the remarkable development of the internal surface drainage and the development of the Artesian Basins. The structure of the continent forms a drainage system with uplifts in the east and subsidence towards the centre. This results in a large basin called the Lake Eyre Basin, one of the largest internal drainage areas in the world. What is noticeable is that it does not have any open sea outlets, has a very low gradient causing the water to flow sluggishly and flows in the direction of diminishing rainfall and increasing evaporation. Since the summer monsoon rains feed the rivers only seasonally, the water usually dissipates long before it reaches the lakes, which are huge salt pans. After Lake Eyre, the second large basin of the lowlands is the Murray Darling Basin. The Darling, which is the longest river in Australia, supplies little water to this system. However, the Murray and its tributaries supply a substantial volume of continuously flowing water. The third basin is in the far north where stream of the Gulf basin empty into the Gulf of Carpentaria.

### **1.3.3 The Eastern Highlands**

The Eastern Highlands rise gently from central Australia towards a series of high plateaus, and even the highest part around Mt Kosciuszko (2,228 m) is part of a plateau. There are a few younger faults and folds, such as the Lake George Fault near Canberra, and the Lapstone Monocline near Sydney.

This great belt of elevated land running from Cape York to the island of Tasmania is commonly but inaccurately called the Great Dividing Range. Inaccurate, because for most of its length the Great Divide (separating rivers flowing to Central Australia from rivers flowing to the Pacific) runs across remarkably flat country dotted with lakes and airstrips, and there is no 'Great Dividing Range'. In eastern Victoria, however, the old plateau has been eroded into separate High Plains (such as Dargo High Plain), mostly lying south of the Divide, which runs here across rugged country. So the elevation in most of the places is no more than 1,200 feet and the landscape is more plateau like than like mountains.

Some plateaus in the Eastern Highlands are dissected by erosion into rugged hills, and the eastern edges of plateaus tend to form high escarpments. Many of these are united to form a Great Escarpment that runs from northern Queensland to the Victorian border. Australia's highest

waterfalls (Wollombi on the Macleay, Wallaman Falls on a tributary of the Herbert, Barron Falls near Cairns, and Wentworth Falls in the Blue Mountains) occur where rivers flow over the Great Escarpment.

Tasmania, despite its separation from the continent, is part of the Eastern Highlands having the same predominance of plateau features.

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## **1.4 CLIMATE**

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Between about 55 and 10 million years ago, Australia drifted across the surface of the earth as a plate, moving north from a position once adjacent to Antarctica. There have been many changes in the climate of Australia in the past, but oddly these are not due to changing latitude. Even when Australia was close to the South Pole, the climate was warm and wet. This climate persisted for a long time, despite changes in latitude. It was probably under this climate that the deep weathered, iron-rich profiles that characterise much of Australia were formed. Aridity only seems to have set in after Australia reached its present latitude, and the northern part was probably never arid though today a large part of it is.

### **Temperature**

Australia's climate results mainly from its size and position relative to the Equator and the surrounding seas. The climate can vary greatly but generally Australia is not subject to extremes of weather due to lack of physical features and the remote location in proportion to other landmasses. The climate ranges from tropical monsoons in the north to temperate in the south. About 40 per cent of Australia is in the tropical region and essentially has only two seasons, a hot wet season and a warm dry season. More than two thirds of Australia is covered by desert, which accounts for most of the population settling on the more temperate coastal areas. Therefore, in Australia, there are no extreme temperatures mainly because of a lack of intense winter cold. All inland stations have hot spells but these are less frequent on the coast. The hottest months in the southerly locations range from 65-75 degree Fahrenheit whereas, in the north the range is 80-85 degree Fahrenheit. The hottest part of the continent centres at Marble Bar in Western Australia where temperatures have been recorded to soar above 100 degree Fahrenheit.

July is the coldest month in the Australian continent. While temperatures in the southern half of the continent can range from 45-55 degree Fahrenheit at elevations lower than 1,500 feet (where it can be lower), a narrow strip in the northern seaboard has temperatures as high as 75 degree Fahrenheit.

### **Precipitation**

Nearly 40 per cent of the continent receives below ten inches of rain per annum while less than nine per cent receives more than 40 inches. Australia is influenced by the easterly wind, which reduce their water vapour content and momentum as they move inland. Thus heaviest rainfalls occur in the east coast northwards particularly in high coastal ranges where summer monsoon rains are supplemented by substantial winter falls. Australia's highest annual total is found here exceeding 170 inches. The next wettest area is north-western Tasmania which can receive 140 inches of annual rainfall.

Moderate rainfall occurs in parts of east coast from Jervis Bay to Cape York Peninsula; West Kimberley coast; about the Alps and in New South Wales and in the highlands of northeastern Tasmania. Much of the interior of the continent receives a low annual average of less than 10 inches.

Apart from the north-eastern region, most Australian rains are associated with tropical and southern depressions. The tropical depressions affecting the northern, eastern and some parts of central region operate in the summer mainly from December to March. The southern depressions are active during the winter half of the year but can also be felt at other times. They bring rain to south-western Australia, parts of South Australia and Victoria and influence Tasmania through the year.

Thus there is variation in an almost total fall in summer in the north and an almost total fall in winter in the southwest, while in Victoria and Tasmania rainfall is fairly evenly distributed with a maximum in October. However, the Australian rainfalls are unreliable particularly towards the centre and on the northern coasts of Western Australia and Queensland.

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## **1.5 AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE**

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### **1.5.1 Emergence and Evolution of Population Policies**

Who are the Australian people? Are they aboriginal peoples or European settlers? Has the arrival of new immigrants changed the Australian society to a large extent? What is the population structure like and is it going to change further? What are the beliefs and cultural values of Australians?

Australia is argued to be one of the most multicultural societies in the world, due largely to its current immigration policies. In order to understand the make-up of Australian society and its people, we must understand its changing nature of the population. To begin with, Australia was not a very diverse society. Settlers were mostly English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh. Even at the time of Federation in 1901, people born in the United Kingdom still made up 58 per cent of all Australians who were born overseas. The Irish made up about a further 21 per cent of these migrants. The immigration was confined only to white Europeans who were mostly from Western Europe. They even went to the extent of imposing a dictation test in a European language of their choice, which the immigrant was expected to pass. This was known as the 'White Australia Policy'. Post-World War II, it was clear that an increase in population was called for. 'Populate or perish' became the slogan of the period leading to further immigration from countries like Poland, Hungary, Germany, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Turkey and other non-European countries. Gradually, the discriminatory immigration policy was dismantled. In the early 1970s, the remaining vestiges of the 'White Australia Policy' were removed and the overall size of immigration programme increased significantly. So much so, ever since the 1970s, the composition of the Australian population has changed dramatically. By the year 2000, Australians born overseas were 24 per cent of the population that is nearly one in four Australians were born overseas and in 1999-2000, about a third of all settler arrivals were born in Asia. The largest growth area in Australia's population in recent times has come from long-term visitors, mainly students from Asia. In the 1970s, tens of thousands of Southeast Asians were admitted to the country, mainly as refugees. By 1988, about 40 per cent of immigration to Australia was from Asia, and by 2001, Asians constituted 5.5 per cent of the population. But now majority of the people being admitted are skilled permanent settler migrants.

However, most of the population of Australia is still of European descent and the United Kingdom still the largest overseas-born group, as a proportion of the total overseas-born, it is declining. Australia's total population by mid-2004 had reached 20.1 million. The natural increase (increase in births, fewer deaths) in Australia's population growth in 2003-04 numbered 121,000, and population growth due to overseas migration was 117,600. While prior to the World War II, more than 90 per cent of the people were of British origin, now this composition is changing. The

second largest birthplace group is the New Zealand-born. Australian aborigines account for about 2 per cent of the total population. Even though Australia lost 27,811 skilled people through permanent emigration in 2003-04, it gained 44,540 skilled permanent settler arrivals. Projections suggest that Australia's population may be around 26 to 27 million by the middle of this century.

## **1.5.2 Population Characteristics**

### **Life Expectancy and Standard of Living**

The average Australian woman has a life expectancy at birth of 80 years, six more years than the average Australian man. Most Australians marry in their mid- to late twenties; married couple families, including de facto families numbered more than four million in 1995. The average married couple has two children and such couples with two children remain the most dominant type of family, accounting for 49 per cent of all families, married couples without children make up 30 per cent, and single parent families make up 13 per cent. Australian women are delaying having children until, on average, they are in their late twenties. They are also having smaller families, with the average size dropping from a peak of 3.5 babies per woman in 1961 to 1.75 babies in 1999. The decline in natural growth of the population is prompting the government to consider ways of encouraging women to have children including an announcement that the government would pay about \$ 3000 per baby born.

Thus Australians overall enjoy good health and a high standard of living, comparable with most European nations and the US. Women are generally considered equal to men with the same levels of education, fairly equal wages and important positions in the public and private sectors. Approximately half the workforce is made up of women.

### **Ageing**

One of the characteristics related to population, which has also become an important issue of concern is ageing. Being an outcome of increased control over childbearing and death, ageing for the last century has generally been welcomed. In the mid 1970s when one of the Australia's most comprehensive studies was undertaken on population, ageing was of no concern. The 1975 Report of the National Population Inquiry (the Borrie Report) only mentioned in passing the ageing of the population and did not take it up for consideration in any policy planning. But in recent years it has become a major concern. This is because as fertility and mortality have both fallen in Australia, the speed and the future level of population ageing have increased sharply. The older the population becomes, the less Australians are actively participating in the workforce. Some research analysts argue that Australia should increase its net migration to cope with declining fertility and ageing of the population. While in the 1980s it was thought that the immigration substantially helped in retarding ageing, by the 1990s it was concluded that immigration was a very inefficient way of reducing the impact of ageing. The end of the 1990s has seen a revival of this debate, which argued against curtailing immigration with the argument that if immigration has helped keep Australia younger in the past, it should be able to do so in the future. However, sceptics point out that it was not immigration by the previous higher levels of fertility and mortality that kept the population young. Therefore, it is clear that Australia needs an appropriate population policy in order to keep Australia young.

### **Urbanisation**

The country is heavily urbanised with over 85 per cent of the population living in urban areas and less than 15 per cent of the population living in rural areas. Capital cities have the most concentrated population, but a substantial part of the population lives in towns. The trend towards concentration

of the population in cities has been evident for many years. This is due to certain special features of the cities: i) They are ports with thriving overseas trade; ii) they have been centres of administrative power since the beginning of the European settlement; and iii) they have absorbed a greater part of secondary industry because of their market and commercial facilities. This trend is aided by low productivity of the interior rural areas, which discourages decentralisation away from principal zones of intensive farming particularly in the southeast of the continent.

Most Australians live in coastal areas (primarily the east coast) due to large parts of inland Australia being covered by desert. Australia has primarily been, in the past, an agricultural and manufacturing nation, with large reserves of minerals, coal and other raw materials. More recently, Australia has been developing its service industries so that it is not so reliant on supplying just the raw materials for a product. This has led to a diversification of jobs available in Australia as well as an economic drain as many manufacturers move their operations overseas. Australia does, however, have a good skills base, stable government and very good communications and telecommunications infrastructures making it attractive to overseas countries looking to establish a base in the Asia Pacific region.

### **1.5.3 Australian Identity and Imagination**

Australians may be said to have a multitude of different identities, which define them as a people-cultural, ethnic, religious, gendered, class-oriented or ideological. The ethnic and cultural complexity of Australian society needs to be understood keeping the above factors in view.

#### **The National**

In the midst of the Australian diversity, is there a 'national identity', which binds them all together? Certain national stereotypes have emerged over the years, which are recognised as typically Australian. But are they really a part of Australian life or are they simply constructed to suit the stereotypical image of a nation that has been built? Do these images still hold and are they still viable in today's ethnic milieu? Have these stereotypes consciously or unconsciously excluded any part of this nation's peoples? Do they have a particular identity? And have these identities changed? These are some of the questions that one needs to ask when exploring the national identity in Australia.

The Australian national identity or the 'Australian type' was a creation of the dominant ideas and ideologies of the Australian society. An Australian was given, through this ideology, a certain character, which encompassed race, religious values and morality. This invariably, given the history of societal evolution in Australia, completely overlooked or ignored certain sections of society. The 'convict' origins of the Australian society (since most of the early settlers were convicts or adventurers from Britain) were considered a shameful past that Australians had to endure even today if they traced their family origin to a convict ancestor. That soon changed however with a rational outlook, which gives credence to the influence of the social environment on a person's character and values rather than inherited genes. What then are the dominant images of Australia's national identity that continue to have resonance today? With the occupation of free settlers in the 19th Century, who had to be strong both mentally and physically to be able to adjust to the land and climate, a very masculine image of an Australian emerged—one who was hardy, adaptable, independent, determined and a pioneer of the bush given to heroic efforts which made him succeed in taming the land. He was egalitarian and valued mateship highly above any respect to authority. The 'Australian Type' was always portrayed as Anglo-Celtic, not only in part, a reflection of the make up of the population at the time but also a cultural suppression of the identities of Aborigines, Torres Strait and Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Germans and many more. This image

continued to dominate the 'national' even though most of the inhabited areas were urban. Most of the literature of the period of writers and poets such as Henry Lawson, A.B. Banjo Paterson, and Steele Rudd reflect this Australian character.

Not only was this a character equated with national identity but was also a way of life that was Australian- the way of life of an Anglo Celtic male who was traditional, egalitarian, and stoic with no concept of a class society. This lifestyle was seen as central to the welfare of the whole community, not just one class of society. The shared ethos of leisure and the 'quarter acre block' is one articulation of the 'Australian way of life'. That is all Australians had a dream of owning their own house in a quarter acre block and a car as well. The well-known Australian satirist Barry Humphries created a special character of an Australian housewife Edna Everidge whom he enacts and who has gained immense popularity, from this ideal Australian dream.

### **The Immigrant and the Multicultural**

This image of an Anglo-Celtic masculine Australia and its ideal way of life, failed to gel with the contemporary diverse multicultural society. For, undoubtedly, the vision was assimilationist in character and did not encompass the various cultural differences. A wave of critique by Australian feminists, Aboriginal activists, and different ethnic community leaders has challenged the dominant representation of what it means to be an Australian. In contesting the 'Australian way of life', they demand the choice of diverse lifestyles, culture and religion. This, in turn, has led to a multiplicity of Australian identities.

### **The Aboriginal**

Australia's aboriginal population is also very vocal today in establishing their own identity, way of life and culture. It was only in 1967 that they were accorded basic rights as citizens. By 1972, they had established their own 'tent embassy' in Canberra protesting their non-recognition. In 1992, they were further rewarded for their efforts when the Australian High Court recognised that Australia was not an empty land belonging to no one at the time of colonisation and that Australian Aborigines too had rights. The number of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people being identified in the national Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is increasing every year. In contrast to the overall population, rather than ageing, the indigenous population is getting progressively younger. This is due to high fertility and mortality rates. Indigenous people continue to suffer poorer health and have a lower life expectancy than other Australians. Thus they are demanding special rights to land and a chance to fully participate in their own governance.

How has the Australian national identity changed? What would be the reaction of the society as a whole to demands being made by the various sections of society to be recognised in their own right? More so in the case of the aboriginals, the demands for the signing of a treaty has been met with resistance by the Australian government and given rise to a lot of debate and controversy in Australian society. How Australia is going to resolve the question of a new identity remains to be seen.

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## **1.6 SUMMARY**

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The main physical features of the Australian continent make its landscape rather uniform in nature with a few variations. It is mostly a flat dry land, which gives it a distinctive physical geography. Most landforms in Australia are very old, generally measured in many millions of years. Australia can be divided into three physiographic regions: the Great Western Plateau, the Central Eastern Lowlands and the Eastern Highland belt along with marginal depressions of various sizes which

have been frequently invaded by the sea. The climate can vary greatly but generally Australia is not subject to extremes of weather due to lack of physical features and the remote location in proportion to other landmasses. The climate ranges from tropical monsoons in the north to temperate in the south. About 40 per cent of Australia is in the tropical region and essentially has only two seasons, a hot wet season and a warm dry season. Forty per cent of the continent receives below 10 inches of rain while nine per cent receives 40 inches. Most of the rain falls in the eastern coast.

In keeping with the climate, most of the population in Australia is settled in the coastal region in the east and is living in the urban areas. While most of the population of Australia is still of European descent and the United Kingdom still the largest overseas-born group, as a proportion of the total overseas-born, it is declining. Australia's total population by mid 2004 had reached 20.1 million. The largest growth area in Australia's population in recent times has come from long-term visitors, mainly students from Asia. More and more Asians are being admitted as skilled permanent settler migrants.

The overall life expectancy of Australians is increasing and its rate of births declining. This has resulted in a situation where the population of Australia is ageing causing concern to the government. It is being debated whether immigration as a policy to stunt ageing is viable.

Increasing immigration has led to a perceived change in the Australian identity. Apart from immigrants of differing nationalities, aboriginals too have become visible in the national and international arena demanding justice and recognition. To move towards a changing identity is going to be a long process for Australia.

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## 1.7 EXERCISES

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- 1) Give a brief account of the main physiological features of the Australian continent.
- 2) Why is Australia known as the 'Dry Continent'? Explain.
- 3) What are the main characteristics of the Australian population?
- 4) How was the Australian national identity perceived in the past? Why and how has it been changing?

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## SUGGESTED READINGS

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