

# Chapter 1

## Cultural Competence and the Higher Education Sector: A Journey in the Academy



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### Introduction

Although cultural competence in higher education is a worthwhile starting point for teaching, learning, research and leadership in the higher education sector, it has been argued that it is the journey and not the destination that is important (Clutton, 2017). What is cultural competence, and what does one encounter on a cultural competence journey? Pecci, Frawley, & Nguyen (in this volume) suggest that cultural competence discourse is a “cartography of sorts”, and this is an apt metaphor. Most journeys require a map, and this book is, on one level, a map of a journey through higher education policies and programmes, where issues and themes emerge through a range of perspectives.

Finding the origin of cultural competence is not easy. It appears to have emerged in the 1970s in the health sector of the USA. The US version of cultural competence was born in child mental health and social services where African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander and First Nations peoples were treated poorly, and hence, equitable care was an issue (Cross et al. 1989). Along with this was the need to find models for effectively working with East Asian refugees who had different cultural models of understanding, spoke other languages and had complex social and healthcare needs.

Over subsequent decades, the practice and study of the cultural competence concept have extended into the areas of business, education and the social sciences. There seems to be general agreement in the literature that an agreed definition of cultural competence is elusive (Pecci et al., this volume). One report suggests that there are more than 300 interrelated constructs (Leung, Ang & Tan, 2014) and a plethora of instruments that claim to measure them. Nevertheless, the definition most

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widely cited in scholarship is provided by Cross et al. (1989, p. iv) who define cultural competence as “a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations”. Cross et al. (1989) emphasise that while identifying a commitment to improving cultural competence at the organisational level is an “ambitious journey”, the process should not be seen as a hindrance to a system. In their view, a culturally competent system would value diversity; have the capacity for individuals and systems to be able to undertake cultural self-assessment; be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact; have institutionalised cultural knowledge; and have developed adaptations to diversity (Cross et al., p. v).

Critical engagement with the existing field of scholarship provides a valuable place from which to understand what is meant by “cultural competence” in both theoretical and practical terms. Frisby and O’Donohue (2018) recommend that cultural competence be viewed rationally and critically rather than dogmatically, unthinkingly and blindly. Likewise, Palmer and Carter (2014) suggest that cultural competence is an ongoing work and is a process not an end-state, with a lifelong commitment to self-critique and reflection. Clutton (2017) believes that the language of “cultural competence” is unhelpful because it focuses on culture as ethnicity and that it is time to shift language to “contextual sensitivity” for the heightened awareness of citizens, as individuals shaped by their histories, socialisation, life experiences and current institutional structures (Clutton, 2017, p. vii).

Cultural competence in an Indigenous Australian context is, in the most part, informed by the constructs of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2003). “Knowing” is about “knowing and understanding history, culture, customs and beliefs”; “being” is about “awareness, authenticity and openness to examining one’s own values and beliefs”; and “doing” is “culturally appropriate action and behaviour”. To develop cultural capabilities requires “continuous development and practice in all three domains, a continuous process of learning” (CoA, 2015, p. 3).

Due to Indigenous people having been treated by most government systems as second-class citizens, there has been a lack of equitable service provision in the areas of health and education. This has had long-lasting implications and resulted in inequitable opportunities. Cultural competence is viewed as both a philosophical rights-based model and a pedagogical approach to improve the knowledge of providers in the areas of law, health, education, housing and welfare; and to reduce unconscious bias in order to enhance Indigenous people equitable access to the basic services all other Australians enjoy.

## Background

In 2014, the University of Sydney established the National Centre for Cultural Competence (NCCC) to become a thought leader in cultural competence philosophy, praxis, process and methods. Since then, NCCC has contributed, through a variety

of ways, to the dissemination of knowledges, pedagogies and skills that inform a whole-of-university approach to embedding cultural competence (Sherwood & Russell-Mundine, 2017). At a university system level, this has included an innovative professional leadership development programme for the university's academic and professional staff. The Culturally Competent Leadership Program develops and supports a network or community of practice of cultural competence champions across the University of Sydney. It has also included a suite of modules and workshop offerings to develop and apply the cultural competence concept. The work of the NCCC is a response to the University of Sydney's 2016–2020 strategic plan that emphasises the development of cultural competence for all staff and builds leadership quality in this area.

While there exist a number of cultural competence conferences with a focus on human rights, health and disabilities, until recently there have been no conferences on cultural competence or the intersections between cultural competence and the higher education sector. In 2018, the NCCC hosted a conference to address this gap: Cultural Competence and the Higher Education Sector: Dilemmas, Policies and Practice Conference 2018. In the consultation phase of the conference, letters were sent to 37 national and international organisations to determine their interest and this received an overwhelmingly positive response.

The hosting of the conference facilitated networking and sharing of information and created a national dialogue about the role of the higher education sector in cultural competency policy and practice. The conference provided a culturally safe opportunity to present research and share experiences and emerging evidence about cultural competence models and approaches. Furthermore, it generated and documented an evidence base about the most effective approaches for supporting cultural competence in the higher education sector and allowed the exploration of different and innovative approaches and strategies that incorporated Indigenous Knowledges (IKs) and practices into the development and implementation of cultural competence in the higher education sector. The chapters in this book are drawn from the presentations at this conference.

## Cultural Competence and the Higher Education Sector

Universities Australia (UA), the peak body representing Australian universities, developed the Indigenous Cultural Competency project to be a key source of guidance and direction in informing the case for cultural competence within the Australian higher education sector. UA recommends making cultural competence in universities all encompassing, including in research practice, teaching and learning methodologies, and employment practices; and sees the role of universities as agents of change, and committed to a social justice agenda. UA (2011) defines cultural competence as:

Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations

of Indigenous Australian peoples ... [and] the ability to critically reflect on one's own culture and professional paradigms in order to understand its cultural limitations and effect positive change. (p. 3)

Developing cultural competence within the higher education sector requires leaders to facilitate and guide a whole-of-institution approach that “includes examining individual attitudes and practice in teaching as well as management, executive, policy and strategic commitment to revise and assess capacity to implement culturally competent teaching, learning, academic, research and employment spaces” (Taylor et al., 2014, p. 37). Cultural competence represents a critically important journey in higher education (Sherwood & Russell-Mundine, 2017) and aligns with UA's view that positions university institutions as agents of change, not only in improving higher education for Indigenous Australians within the universities, but also by making “a commitment to the capacity building of Indigenous communities” to reach more equitable outcomes for access and participation within these institutions (UA, 2011, p. 17). This requires leadership that is open, respectful and committed to a reflective cycle of critical thinking that explores context and content beyond a general appraisal, leading to critical reflective praxis.

This book, set in a higher education context, aims to create a national and international dialogue about the role of the higher education sector in cultural competence policy and practice, by sharing different perspectives and experiences, present research and emerging evidence about cultural competence models and approaches.

## Perspectives

The concept of culture is a useful starting point; however, like cultural competence, it is a concept that resists definition. Given that the concept of culture cannot be easily grasped in that it is forever changing, it should also present challenges when being measured in unidimensional or face valid terms (see Wang et al., this volume). Nevertheless, exploring the concept of culture can provide the basis for considering the way culture is used in cultural competence. It is also useful to consider how the words “culture” and “cultures” are used in terms such as “workplace culture” and “organisational culture” and in regard to institutional racism; and that cross-cutting the concept of cultural competence are interrelated concepts such as IKs, racism and leadership.

Indigenous Knowledges in higher education should traverse the disciplines and extend beyond Indigenous perspectives to one in which the “discipline areas may themselves be challenged” (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 33). Parent (2014) states that IKs:

encompass the technological, social, economic, philosophical, spiritual, educational, legal and governmental elements of particular Indigenous cultures throughout the world. As Indigenous Knowledges are context-specific and interwoven within a given community's lived experience, they are dynamic and ever-changing to reflect environmental and social adaptations. Indigenous Knowledges are therefore not a singular body of knowledge but are

multi-dimensional and pluralistic in that they contain many layers of being, knowing, and modes of expression. (p. 59)

Indigenous Knowledges within the academy call for transformative practice—not just within teaching and learning, but about what it means for the student experience (Martin, 2016). It also calls for the co-creation of an intercultural space in which cultures and knowledges can be shared and co-developed, seeking a balance of western knowledge systems with Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. The embedding of IKs in the academy does, however, come with a caution, in that this process remains a problematic, complicated, contested and contentious affair that requires more than a simple positioning of these knowledges in educational policy, curriculum and pedagogy (Acton et al., 2017; Nakata, 2007).

A commitment to embedding cultural competence reinforces the need to actively address the nationwide challenge of racism which can occur in both direct and indirect forms, at personal through to systems levels. As noted by Wang et al. (in this volume), regardless of personal characteristics, histories or commitments, all human beings are completely capable of racism. However, this does not negate the requirement for honest conversations about racism, which are necessary to recognise that racism is socially constructed and operates through discourse, policy and practices to recreate and legitimise “White domination” (Crenshaw, 1988; Pechenkina & Liu, 2018).

Leadership, like the concepts of culture and cultural competence, remains a difficult concept to succinctly define, although there is an intersection and alignment between leadership and cultural competence. Despite this difficulty, leadership in a culturally competent context suggests an underlying set of attributes, skills, behaviours and knowledge is required in order to transform higher education systems that aim for cultural change, equity, equality and social justice. A reflection on how the education system remains strongly aligned to a settler-colonial model that creates Indigenous deficit, to supplant Indigenous sovereignty (Johnston, this volume), suggests that forging change in claiming restoration and shifting the national unconscious bias remain a challenge.

## Policies

In 2011, UA, the peak body of the university sector that represents all Australian universities and develops policy positions on higher education matters, published the *Guiding Principles for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (UA, 2011) which recommends that “all graduates of Australian universities should be culturally competent” (p. 7).

Universities Australia (2011) proposes incorporating IKs and perspectives into all university curricula to provide learners with the understanding, abilities and behaviours that underpin Indigenous cultural competence. UA acknowledges that this requires the involvement of Indigenous people at all levels of higher education governance and management, teaching, research, and community engagement and

that Indigenous representation at governance and management levels is an important factor in Indigenous higher education policy and programme environments (UA, 2011).

Applied policies are apparent at institutional level through whole-of-university strategies, initiatives and programmes. Some systems within the higher education sector have embraced whole-of-university policies to enhance Indigenous education that brings together important fields of student facilities, jobs and governance, teaching and learning, research, human resources, community involvement, and global outreach.

A whole-of-university approach to cultural competence would ensure Indigenous involvement in university governance, management, teaching and learning, and research and a greater presence of Indigenous staff in the academy. It would also mean that universities establish stronger and more meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities, especially those within their geographical regions. Such an approach means that systems thinking is realised and driven from the bottom-up. (Frawley, Larkin & Smith, 2017, p. 7)

## Programmes

The *Guiding Principles for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities* (UA, 2011) sets forth a number of recommendations “to provide a practical guide for Australian universities to develop their programs and processes regarding Indigenous cultural competence theory and practice” (UA, 2011, p. 2). The chapters in this book present a number of programmes that put some of these recommendations into practice.

Universities Australia (2011) recommends that all graduates of Australian universities should be culturally competent. Several Australian universities have progressed this recommendation and have included a specific graduate quality that includes cultural competence (Frawley, 2017). At other levels, initiatives such as “students as partners” (Bell et al., in this volume) aim to bring cultural competence and students together as partners. UA (2011) states that the design and distribution of high-quality, culturally inclusive professional education depend on the training of academic employees in cultural competences, and some authors outline initiatives in this regard (see Doyle et. al.; and Fredericks et al., in this volume). Quinnell et. al. (in this volume) suggest that where campus environments are inclusive of Indigenous cultures and knowledges, learning and learning spaces can be extended to the entire university campus and the whole campus can be used for education programmes.

This is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach, nor is it something that can be addressed overnight or on the fly. In order to build a strong foundation for higher education staff and students to develop and grow their understanding of cultural competence, there needs to be whole-of-university support, and time and funding for this to occur.

## Conclusion

While cultural competence is an evasive concept and difficult to define, it is the cultural competence journey, with all its detours through a range of perspectives and policies, that is important, not the destination nor the definition. In fact, it is debatable whether those engaged in a cultural competence journey will ever reach a final destination, given the continuous journey of learning that cultural competence represents. Nevertheless, there has been a whole-of-university approach to providing policies and programmes that support academic and professional staff and students to navigate their journey through a cultural competence landscape. Some of these policies address the professional development of staff, the establishment of a cultural competence graduate quality, and integrating IKs and insights into the university curricula, to provide students with the understanding, skills and behaviours underpinning Indigenous cultural competence.

The challenge of establishing cultural competence in the higher education sector has been addressed in a number of ways, perhaps reflecting the diversity of perspectives aligned with the concept. If the aim is for all Australian universities to develop their cultural competence through policies and programmes, then this journey needs to be encouraged and supported.

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