

# Chapter 9

## How We Do Business: Setting the Agenda for Cultural Competence at the University of Sydney

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### Introduction

The National Centre for Cultural Competence (NCCC) was established in 2014 at the University of Sydney (the University) to become a thought leader in cultural competence philosophy, praxis, process and methods. The NCCC contributes to the dissemination of knowledges, pedagogies and skills that inform a whole of university approach to embedding cultural competence. This requires a contextual, analytical and methodological focus on the organisation and its many systems. At the same time, the NCCC works to support, develop and inform a broad base of individuals; from students to the many levels of staff employed within the organisation.

The University's first ever Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Integrated Strategy *Wingara Mura – Bunga Barrabugu* (*Wingara Mura*) (The University of Sydney 2012) provided a vital framework from which to launch the NCCC. The NCCC's mandate includes developing models for effective cultural competence in order to grow a university that is inclusive and openly welcomes diversity. This mandate is firmly embedded in a social justice and human rights agenda and provides a critical framework for the rolling out of cultural competence. Such a perspective contains the imperative of challenging prevailing assumptions about power, privilege and various forms of oppression that underlie current policies, programs and methods of doing business across the University. A central part of our work in this space, therefore, requires us to advocate for the elimination of those policies that diminish people's sense of control over their lives. Simultaneously, we need to work for the expansion of those programs that enable individuals to exercise personal freedom which contributes to people feeling like integral and valued parts of society (Mertens et al. 2009).

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A vital first step in this journey for the University is to acknowledge the inherent rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be self-determined and respected as Australia's first peoples (The University of Sydney 2012, p. 3). The University has done this through *Wingara Mura* (The University of Sydney 2012). The strategy is framed around three interpersonal and institutional building blocks: opportunity, capability and rights. *Wingara Mura* places the promotion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation, engagement, education and research as a core objective of the University. Within this policy context, the NCCC aims to provide the essential framework to embed the cultural competence qualities necessary to implement the strategy across the organisation, its staff and students.

The NCCC's mandate has been supported by the leaders of the University and, critically, is now embedded in the University's strategic plans and policies (University of Sydney 2016) sending a clear message that cultural competence is core business. This level of patronage and cooperation is vital for the NCCC's directive, tenure and success, as well as for the University's ability to take up this change agenda.

Attending – and working – in universities can be a culturally isolating experience for many. There is a range of factors, including racism, that act as barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students accessing and succeeding at university (Behrendt et al. 2012, p. 109; Larkin 2013, p. 228). The 2011 report 'Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People' recommended that universities need to 'improve the cultural understanding and awareness of staff, students and researchers within their institution, including the provision of cultural competency training' (Behrendt et al. 2012, p. 113). The report's recommendations are necessary if universities are to change the culture(s) of their institution(s) and in doing so provide an environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff feel they belong, and that their cultures and are respected to enable a safe learning environment.

The University is in the start-up phase of achieving far-reaching systemic cultural change. While it has embraced the journey, there is still much work to be done on exploring the depths of what it means to create such a change across the whole university. This chapter seeks to set out the rationale for locating this systemic change in a cultural competence framework. The University is working on the systemic and organisational implementation of cultural competence through concrete actions such as the development of policies to increase Indigenous employment and Indigenous student numbers. This chapter will focus on the implications of this change agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

## Higher Education Context

The focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is necessary to address the disproportionately low rate of participation of those students in the higher education sector. Although more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are

finishing Year 12, 60% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school leavers are not involved in study or work after leaving school (COAG Reform Council 2013). In 2015, 1.1% of university enrolments were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students which represented a 7.6% increase between 2014 and 2015 (Department of Education and Training 2015, p. 1).

Despite this improvement there continue to be gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students in various measures such as school attendance, Year 12 attainment and participation in higher education (COAG Reform Council 2013; Commonwealth of Australia 2016). These gaps persist in part due to chronic health problems experienced by Indigenous students, lack of access to educational institutions, financial constraints and social, cultural and language barriers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2005, 2015). The persistence of these gaps represents a failure of the education system (Rigney 2011). The lack of recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's languages, being the oldest of living languages in the world, should not be considered a barrier, although the mainstream education agenda has ensured that any language other than English is to be considered a barrier. This is cultural incompetence.

In order to address the issues, it must also be recognised that the current gaps in higher education participation have roots in the early years of the schooling system (Craven and Dillon 2013) as well as in the historical exclusion and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. For much of the past two centuries when it came to educating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the prevailing view was that

Aboriginal children should be offered only minimal schooling consistent with the perceptions about the limitations inherent in their race and their expected station in life at the lowest rungs of white society (Beresford 2003, p. 87).

Consequently, education was overtly focused on teaching Western morals, Christianising and 'civilizing' Aboriginal people away from their 'savage' ways (Bodkins-Andrews 2013, p. 35). This educational style effectively set up schools as purveyors of assimilation and led to a range of barriers preventing Aboriginal participation at all levels of education (Beresford 2003, p. 107).

The perception of education as being a vehicle for assimilation continues. As Buckskin (2013, p. 2) states, 'The main measure of success for Aboriginal Australians is our assimilation into the dominant culture through the mastering of English literacy and Western norms.' This statement highlights a way that universities have continued the assimilation impetus by failing to recognise and respect Indigenous knowledge systems within the academy (Battiste 2002; Buckskin 2013; Martin 2008; Rigney 1999; Riley et al. 2013; Sherwood et al. 2011). Rather than being considered equal participants, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have largely been the objects of investigation and study (Martin 2008; Smith 2003) and non-Indigenous people have been positioned as the knowers and experts who had authority, legitimacy, domination and control (Fredericks 2009, p. 5). Universities have failed to engage in significant and systemic ways with Indigenous standpoints (Larkin 2013, p. 231). Yet, to successfully increase participation in

education, it is 'critical that the unique position and perspective of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students be both respected and protected' (Bodkins-Andrews 2013, p. 41).

The experience of racism for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must also be considered as an impetus for change if we are to effectively ensure a space where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can safely study. There is still ongoing resistance to teachings about cultural values, learnings and identities beyond the Western knowledge system (Bodkins-Andrews 2013; Cleland et al. 2012). Research by Bodkins-Andrews (2013, p. 34) highlights that embedded in this resistance is a level of racism which continues to present a significant obstacle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the education system. This is because the Western knowledge systems have dictated what is considered to be worth knowing within their institutions and silenced the voices and knowledge of those they have managed to construct as the other.

We have learnt a great deal over the last decade of the impact of racism on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples worldwide, a direct result of the growth of Indigenous participation and effective research in the academy (Brondolo et al. 2011; Durey 2010; Karlsen and Nazroo 2002; Larson et al. 2007; Paradies et al. 2008; Power et al. 2015; Priest et al. 2011). Importantly, racism impacts on students' learning opportunities and plays a significant role in many marginalised students' experiences within the tertiary sector (Power et al. 2015; Ronnau 1994; Schroeder and DiAngelo 2010; Sherwood et al. 2013; Weir 2001).

Despite efforts by universities to increase participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students, as well as to respect, recognise and acknowledge Indigenous knowledges, there remain challenges (Larkin 2013, p. 228). Good will and good intentions do not automatically lead to improvements in higher education outcomes (Larkin 2013, p. 229). The willingness and effectiveness of universities to embed Indigenous knowledges in research, teaching and learning domains will be an indicator of the success of the various policies that universities profess to implement (Larkin 2013).

Moreton-Robinson et al. (2011, p. 1) conjure up an image of a stony ground to describe universities as 'places where the seeds of Indigenous human capital have struggled to take root because they have been under-nourished' (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2011, p. 56). Larkin (2013, p. 232) elaborates on the metaphor and suggests that the stony ground persists because of resistance by universities to address ongoing Indigenous disadvantage, attributing it instead to an Indigenous cultural deficit. The stony ground could also be as a result of universities claiming not to know where to start or what to do, or not believing that things are 'that bad', or being unwilling to take responsibility. Finally, Larkin suggests that universities tend to claim to know the answers without including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in any planning or development of solutions.

The constraints and barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education are well documented (Behrendt et al. 2012; Kinnane et al. 2014), and there is no doubt about the importance of addressing these issues. Participation in higher education leads to a range of benefits (Behrendt et al. 2012;

Craven and Dillon 2013) and is a key pathway to decreasing inequity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Bodkins-Andrews 2013, p. 30). As Universities Australia (2011, p. 17) highlighted:

It is the key which unlocks the door to meaningful and well-paid employment, to better housing, health and access to society's valued resources. It is the foundation stone for the practice of self-determination and achievement of social justice and Indigenous equality.

The impact of lack of access to education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at all levels, therefore, cannot be underestimated and enhancing Indigenous participation in higher education needs to be more widely recognised and proactively addressed as a significant international socioeconomic issue of our time (Craven and Dillon 2013, p. 22).

Evidence suggests that cultural competence is a mechanism that can work to reduce some of the disparities in education experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Sherwood et al. 2011; Sherwood et al. 2013). To further this agenda Universities Australia has recommended that all Australian universities embed cultural competence into their policies. Doing so will address the systems and practices that create barriers to Indigenous students both enrolling and flourishing at university as well as career pathways for Indigenous academics and professional staff.

Indigenous cultural competence requires an organisational culture which is committed to social justice, human rights and the process of reconciliation through valuing and supporting Indigenous cultures, knowledges and peoples as integral to the core business of the institution. It requires effective and inclusive policies and procedures, monitoring mechanisms and allocation of sufficient resources to foster culturally competent behaviour and practice at all levels of the institution (Universities Australia 2011, p. 48).

Moreton-Robinson et al. (2011, p. 18) link cultural competence to governance in the sense of increased participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the university's decision-making processes. Accordingly, if universities are to increase cultural competence, it is surmised that this is impossible to achieve without high-level Indigenous influence. It will also require significant change across the higher education system and will compel individual universities to systemically embed the philosophy and practice of cultural competence into all areas of their operations.

## **Responding to the Call for Change at the University of Sydney**

Increasingly, higher education institutions are expected to graduate students that can effectively work in global and culturally diverse situations (Goodman 2013). At the University, these knowledges, skill bases, values and behaviours will be assessed as graduate qualities of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (University of Sydney 2016). To achieve this, teaching, learning and research opportunities need to equip

students to develop their capacity to understand their worldviews as well as respecting those of others.

An additional impetus to engage in a cultural competence agenda is a desire to improve the equity and safety of the learning environment for all students. At the University, this entails a particular focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and whose land our University is built upon. This calls for the recognition of our First Nation's people sovereignty and current circumstances, resulting from invasion and ongoing colonisation. It also calls us to be particularly cognisant of the rich diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cultures, languages and experiences, along with students from other countries who also share diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who, because of this, have been similarly marginalised within the Western academy.

Internal research conducted at the University in 2014 highlighted that cultural competence was seen as an important personal and professional goal by both students and industry; however, it was also recognised that cultural competence as a graduate attribute was being under-delivered (The University of Sydney 2014).

The University has responded to the call for change in several ways under the umbrella of its *Wingara Mura* strategy (The University of Sydney 2012). The strategy is a whole of University approach which 'aims to ensure that all faculties and University services are committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advancement' (The University of Sydney 2016).

Under *Wingara Mura* a wide range of activities and programs have been implemented which specifically focus on increasing participation (The University of Sydney 2012, 2016). For example, the Student Support and Retention team is responsible for promoting the transition from school and retention at the University. The *Cadigal Special Entry Program* assists Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school leavers and mature-age applicants with a modified entry and an intensive two-week Academic Skills Program designed to equip students with the skills to succeed in their first year of university. Culturally safe spaces are also provided which include a computer laboratory, a research library, tutorial room for study and a student/staff common room with full kitchen facilities. Retention and support strategies also include tutors, academic advisers and dedicated student-support services.

## **Cultural Competence: What Is It?**

Cultural competence has been a growing field of study and practice over the past four decades (van den Berg 2010), particularly in the fields of health, education, social science and business (Bainbridge et al. 2015; Betancourt et al. 2005; Bond and Brough 2007; Campinha-Bacote 2002; CAN n.d.; Cross et al. 1989; Diller and Moule 2005; Goode et al. 2014; Kirmayer 2012; Kumagai and Lypson 2009; Leininger 1988; Ramsden 2002; van den Berg 2010; Walker et al. 2014). The

breadth of this theorising and practice continues to be dynamic and ever evolving (Rosenjack Burcham 2002).

‘Cultural competence’ is a term that can have many meanings and is not without its critics. For example, some critics claim that cultural competence leads to an essentialist view of culture and focuses too much on ethnicity (Garneau and Pepin 2015, p. 11; Kirmayer 2012). It is also often conflated with multiple concepts such as cultural safety (Bin-Sallik 2003) leading to differing and sometimes conflicting views (Ben-Ari and Strier 2010). The disciplinary diversity of these multiple views brings robustness to the dialogue about cultural competence, but also highlights that any implementation of a cultural competence model is highly dependent on the context and what cultural competence looks like in those specific contexts (Cleland et al. 2012). Any development of cultural competence models must be responsive to the business of the service and to the needs of those they are servicing. The most widely used definition derives from Cross et al. (1989):

Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. The word ‘culture’ is used because it implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. The word competence is used because it implies having the capacity to function effectively. A culturally competent system of care acknowledges and incorporates--at all levels--the importance of culture, the assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance towards the dynamics that result from cultural differences, the expansion of cultural knowledge, and the adaptation of services to meet culturally-unique needs (Cross et al. 1989, p. 27).

In their monograph, Cross et al. (1989) provide a level of detail that clearly sets out a way to implement cultural competence: this is perhaps the reason why it has become the most commonly used description of what cultural competence means. The authors of this seminal publication have determined that working safely with different cultures demands a complexity of theorising, discernment, knowledge building and development of values along with action across all levels including for example; policy, education and training and resourcing change programs adequately. Cultural competence is regarded as an overarching aspiration to be worked towards that involves incremental and evolving processes and shifts in knowledge, values, behaviours and actions.

Although the Cross et al. (1989) definition is widely referred to and adapted, often people do not take note of the full conceptualisation of cultural competence put forward in their monograph. This includes five key elements which are essential to assist the individual, systems and organisations to navigate this journey. The National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University (NCCC Georgetown), Washington DC (2006), has developed the Cross et al. (1989) elements to:

1. Value diversity and culture
2. Be able to conduct cultural self-assessment
3. Be conscious of the dynamics of cultural difference



**Fig. 9.1** Cultural Competence Framework – adapted from NCCC Georgetown (2006) and Cross et al. (1989) (Adapted with permission of the Georgetown University National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child & Human Development, Georgetown University Medical Center ©2006)

4. Acquire and institutionalise cultural knowledge
5. Adapt services to reflect and understand cultural diversity in the community

From an organisational point of view, it is essential that these five elements function at every level of the system and that attitudes, policies and practices must also be congruent at all levels. Any organisational approach to developing cultural competence must include all these elements as identified in Fig. 9.1.

## Locating Cultural Competence in a Social Justice and Change Agenda

Cultural competence can be understood as a philosophy, a paradigm and praxis. Its central tenet is the transformation from a sometimes unknowing, superior, and closed standpoint towards a more open and introspective worldview (NCCC 2015). Understood well, cultural competence is aligned with a social justice change agenda (Universities Australia 2011).

Cultural competence as a philosophical framework and practice was initially developed in the USA in response to health disparities experienced by children of marginalised and minority populations which were a direct result of racial

discrimination, poverty and, for some, such as First Nations peoples living in remote areas on reserves, geographical isolation (Cross et al. 1989).

Although a member of the UN, the USA was failing to uphold the 1946 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights & World Health Organization, 2008, p. 1), in particular, the right to health which is a ‘fundamental part of our human rights and of our understanding of a life in dignity’ (World Health Organisation n.d., p. 1).

The passing of the USA’s Civil Rights Act in 1964 was a ‘catalytic’ event that led to previously excluded groups gaining access to services such as education and housing, which ultimately led to paradigm shifts across a range of service deliverers (Arredondo and Perez 2006, p. 2). Subsequent to the Civil Rights Act, equitable healthcare service and delivery to children of marginalised and minority population groups were mandated in the USA. With this in mind, Cross et al. (1989) published an approach to guide an organisation, its systems and its staff, to undertake and foster principles of the human rights of all peoples along with equity for all.

The human rights imperative for implementing cultural competence is equally strong in Australia. Evidence abounds of the failure of governments at all levels to provide an environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can freely exercise their human and civil rights. Even while Australia was drafting and signing the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in Geneva (Australian Human Rights Commission n.d.), at home Protectionism, Absorption and Assimilation policies, which severely curtailed the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, were being developed and implemented (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997). More recently, while Australia was reluctantly and belatedly supporting the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Australia 2015) it was implementing legislation that was so far-reaching in its implications for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory that the Federal Racial Discrimination Act 1975 was suspended in order to pass the legislation (Harris 2012).

The evidence of human rights failures is in the ‘gaps’. Gaps exist in life expectancy, and outcomes of various diseases (Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee 2016), the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in jails, including the rapid increase of imprisonment of rates of women and juveniles (ABS 2016) as well as persistent gaps in education participation and outcomes and employment opportunities (Behrendt et al. 2012).

In the past decade, various strategies have been formulated at a Federal and State level to address these disparities. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) continues to work to its Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage agenda, which seeks to overcome gaps in life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment (Council of Australian Governments n.d.). The Close the Gap policy agenda continues to focus on addressing health disparities (NACCHO-Oxfam-Australia 2007).

The NCCC locates its understanding of cultural competence very much in the context of addressing social justice issues. In line with the Wingara Mura strategy, our agenda within the University is to overtly address social injustice and create change.

## Rolling Out Cultural Competence at the University of Sydney

The University was the first university in Australia and was established in 1850 (The University of Sydney [n.d.-a](#)). Its motto *sidere mens eadem mutata* ('The constellation is changed, the disposition is the same') (The University of Sydney [n.d.-b](#)) highlights its proud history which explicitly builds on the traditions of its British heritage, down to its sandstone buildings and disciplinary agendas which were entrenched in colonial imperialism. While the University was founded on espoused values of equality and access to all, like other Australian universities its pedagogical foundation was modelled on the British system which was originally designed to educate the aristocracy (Ma Rhea and Russell [2012](#)). This embedding of a particular type of Western education is important to note because, like other Australian universities, the various functions of the University have impacted heavily on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples:

Universities in Australia have been educating professionals for over 100 years. The education provided by Universities has shaped the thinking and practices of generations of professionals who have played a significant role in structuring relationships between Indigenous Australians and the broader society, including advising colonial and contemporary governments, authorities and professional bodies on policy and practice, constructing and legitimating societal values and attitudes, and providing professional services to Indigenous peoples (Universities Australia & Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council [2011](#), p. 18).

It is in this context that the NCCC works. In line with the University's philosophy that cultural competence is 'everyone's business' (The University of Sydney [2012](#)) it is important to be mindful of our particular role. We have been established to guide thinking, develop best practice frameworks, produce resources and to lead a national dialogue on cultural competence. We work in collaboration with colleagues across the University to influence change in policy and structures, and we develop thinking and resources to support those changes and to address practices, attitudes and behaviours. We are mindful of the evolving nature of our mandate. For example, although the University is promoting cultural competence as a graduate quality, we cannot produce a culturally competent graduate as the theorising in this field clearly indicates that full competence is never achieved (Goode and Like [2012](#)). What we can aim for is to support students to develop capabilities and capacity that will accompany them on their life-long journey towards cultural competence.

The first step on the NCCC's journey was to explore the many cultural competence definitions and build our comprehension of how we could work in this space. As we developed our thinking, we recognised that some models of cultural competence have been developed to work within specific disciplines such as health. Our mandate is far greater than a single academic or professional discipline; it is the entire university, and beyond. Therefore, we have sought to find the essential characteristics that are intrinsic to a cultural competence focus across different contexts. Importantly, to ensure successful and sustainable embedding across all domains of

the University we must contribute to the development of a cultural competence model that works for this University.

We have drawn on Cross et al. (1989), the further development of that thinking by the NCCC Georgetown, as well as the Universities Australia model. Also important to our conceptualisation and approach has been the many years of thinking in this area by Indigenous academics and practitioners (Angus and Wise 1997; Best 2014; Fredericks and Marlene 2010; Nash et al. 2006; Sherwood 2006).

One of our first tasks was to develop a values and principles statement which laid out the way we intend to operate. We know that to grow and thrive, the NCCC must recognise the First Peoples of Australia and their protocols, values and principles. In summary, our values and principles statement means that the NCCC aims to honour the spirit and integrity through its recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The statement informs how the NCCC staff will work together with the diverse communities of First Nations Peoples and the learning community of the University. The NCCC honours time, as a continuum between past, present and future. This understanding forms the basis of the NCCC's holistic philosophy. Another value we adhere to is respect which as we understand it, 'in the Indigenous sense, means to listen and to hear and value what we have to say about ourselves and our experiences, even if what we have to say challenges your ways of knowing' (Sherwood 2010, p. 261). We value listening as a key skill and see it as an active process and method which demands respect of the speaker through a disciplined openness of the 'listener' who is being provided with privileged information. We acknowledge all peoples, respecting, acknowledging and welcoming diversity of worldviews, cultures and standpoints and aspire to be open and flexible in our thinking. The NCCC also develops reciprocal relationships with partners and communities which define obligations are multidimensional and are balanced. The NCCC will practice and model critical thinking and reflective practice so as to know a sense of self and place and how to work with others.

We are taking a systems approach to our work that supports engagement and participation across numerous strategies. Intentionally, we are instigating cultural competence as a transformational change and social justice education agent. Central to our cultural competence framework is the imperative to utilise Indigenous knowledge practices and research methods to grow pedagogical models for teaching and learning. Importantly, we model Indigenous pedagogies with our academic peers to strengthen their ability to apply these pedagogies in their teaching and to strengthen their collaborative work with Indigenous communities. We are doing this by embedding Indigenous pedagogies into our resources as well as developing a specific focus on well-being, sense of self and relational learning. Importantly, we intend to model mentoring support for students and academic peers in the area of cultural competence and grow knowledge about culturally safe spaces; and develop strategies for delivering these spaces throughout the University for all students and staff.

Through this type of mentoring and peer support, we are focused on building the University's capacity to sustain its path of social justice education, across all levels of the University system. A significant part of this is to encourage and foster collaborative leadership and governance for shared purpose with Aboriginal

communities, and University faculties, student-support services, human resources, students and student bodies.

The effectiveness of the centre and its diverse body of work will be narrated, measured and evaluated through our collaborative community participatory action research model (CCPAR) (Sherwood, 2013a, b). CCPAR is a process that has been shown to be effective in providing a clear picture of our process and the outcomes of our research and work.

## **NCCC Work to Date**

These are still early days for us. In the short time we have existed, we have consulted widely across the University's academic and research structures and systems including faculties, students, and outside the University, in particular with Aboriginal communities. We have bid for and won a number of consultancies and been awarded grants.

The NCCC's initial body of work has been to develop foundational resources to support and excite our peers into taking up the cultural competence philosophy and pedagogy in their curriculum, teaching and research. We are developing introductory workshops which focus on foundational elements of cultural competence including developing a sense of self and well-being; developing critical self-reflection capabilities, racism and relational learning pedagogies.

We are writing a series of research papers that clearly sets out the vision and implementation of a culturally competent university to build evidence and co-generate new knowledge. We are focused on collective and relational service learning hubs where Aboriginal communities are steering what processes will be used and voicing the outcomes they would like to see accomplished through these partnerships. We are also developing one of the first Massive Online Open Courses (MOOC) at the University, which focuses on relating cultural competence to an understanding about the context of our location here in Sydney from Aboriginal perspectives.

There are other signs that cultural competence is on the University's agenda and which highlight some of the successful partnerships and collaborations that have developed as a wide variety of projects are established across the University. For example, the University's Annual Teaching Colloquium in 2015, a collaboration between the NCCC and the University's Institute for Teaching and Learning, highlighted cultural competence. An inspiring keynote address from the Racial Discrimination Commissioner, Dr Tim Soutphommasane was intertwined with presentations from staff and students which showed not only the range of activities underway across the University but also the level of commitment and engagement that transverses discipline silos. According to the feedback from the day, it was the

most successful colloquium run at the University and has provided an opportunity to elicit interest from a range of staff and students about engaging further with the cultural competence agenda.

As much as our outward facing activities have been important, we have prioritised our development as a small team which is still establishing itself. We are creating the culture of the NCCC even while we labour under a heavy workload. We are developing new ways of working that are not typical of academic environments. We are co-generating shared knowledge and finding ways to do that effectively, efficiently and innovatively. This has not been without challenges, and we have come to refine our expectations about the range of skills, behaviours and attitudes that will flourish in this dynamic environment. We seek to model how to create a safe working and learning environment and have been through many of the challenges that we would expect to see in a changing space. As we have developed our team, we have seen great achievements but have also met with resistance and a preference for a more individual way of working which does not fit the way we seek to develop. We have welcomed people in to do particular projects and have farewelled some who have identified that this is not the space for them.

## Conclusion

We have found at the University that the mandate for growing a cultural competence focus that includes involving and working with Indigenous communities has also opened up opportunities for students from other marginalised groups to have a safe space to voice their experiences and concerns. Providing knowledge and guidance for both academic and professional staff in the accommodating of cultural competence is paramount. This means thinking differently about how we approach our work and our clients, the students. It is about being respectful and responsive to their personal and learning needs while they are in our care.

One of our greatest challenges is to be strategic about where we focus our efforts. Our role is not to do the work of the University for them but to guide, to model and to promote best practice and innovative thinking. The University has embedded cultural competence into its strategic plan, as both as student learning outcome and a university change strategy which bodes well for the NCCC's mission.

It is perhaps too early to see the impact of the University's efforts, as it operationalises cultural competence across the University, in empirical evidence but we are confident that we are laying the foundations for an environment that is culturally safe and where all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff will flourish.

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