Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia: Research Report

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Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia

A 4 year study that researched how leadership is practised in the intersection of the cultural and gender differences in Australian organisations known for their best practice in diversity and inclusion management and programs.

3 AUSTRALIAN ORGANISATIONS

69 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

4-9 MONTH ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES

Key Findings

→ Effective diversity management needs to focus on radical equality

→ Diversity and inclusion management can entrench inequality

→ Differences become compartmentalised and stereotyped

→ Relational leadership can be positive and negative

→ Intersectional relations are complex and inherently political

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ADVANCE INTERSECTIONAL EQUALITY AMONG A DIVERSE AUSTRALIAN WORKFORCE?

FOR LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS

Advocate the moral case for diversity.

Stand against 'the way things are done around here'.

Understand the history of discrimination.

Collaborate with diversity organisations.

Map intersectional diversity in relation to hierarchy and roles.

Be a relational leader and listen to what all staff have to say.

FOR DIVERSITY & HRM PROFESSIONALS

Deal with real issues of discrimination, oppression, misogyny, and racism.

Understand diversity as an intersectional spectrum, not a set of categories.

Tailor diversity and inclusion strategies to organisation-specific problems.

Challenge the myth of meritocracy to create equality of outcomes.

Politicise diversity and inclusion practices.

FOR BUSINESS EDUCATORS

Embed diversity in curriculum and pedagogy.

Seek expertise in Indigenous history and in Australian multi-culturalism.

Engage students in leadership as a collective practice.

Explore how relationships foster discrimination and workplace violence.

Discuss the moral case for diversity.

Disrupt the status quo.

Content

Executive Summary

Context: Leadership in Australia

Australia is commonly regarded as a 'success story' for multiculturalism, with 30% of its population being born overseas (ABS, 2021), and for developing progressive policies on issues of gender equality. Many equality measures and laws regulate our domestic and work lives. Diversity and inclusion strategies and practices have been widely implemented as equity interventions to address the imbalances borne from persistent discrimination and inequality. Despite this, there is a lack of significant progress in the diversity of public and private organisational leaders. Among senior leaders and executives, 76% are from Anglo-Celtic, and 19% are from European backgrounds (Soutphommasane et al., 2018). Women comprise only 20% of senior leaders and executives and 30% of key management personnel positions (AICD, Heidrick & Struggles, 2018; Cassells & Duncan, 2020).

Research Approach: A multi-case study of Australian organisations

The Australia Research Council funded 'Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia' project addressed three primary research aims:

- To assess how leadership is practised in the intersection of cultural and gender differences that characterise the relationships between leaders and followers as experienced in specific organisational contexts.

- To develop an empirically grounded and practically relevant theorisation of inclusive relational leadership.

- To advance strategies for leadership practice and education that address cultural and gender diversity.

The project focused on:

- 3 Australian small to medium public and private organisations.

- 69 key participants.

- Immersive ethnographic case studies of 4-9 months each.

- Interviews, observation and organisational documentation reviews.

Key findings

The project surfaced how diversity in organisations is made visible through internal and external means. Internally, diversity is managed through formal strategies and documents, informal activities and dedicated diversity and inclusion positions. Externally, diversity is demonstrated through the display of symbolic and material engagement with diversity and inclusion (e.g., public statements on same-sex marriage, customer-based multicultural programs and community guidelines) and the attainment of awards and certifications. The project also highlighted that despite changes to the workforce composition and diversity in business being promoted, celebrated and championed, many obstacles remain to expanding the diversity of the workforce and its leadership.

What gets in the way of progress?

- **Categories and hierarchies of diversity**: Organisational categories developed to manage and contain various forms of diversity that are not designed to address issues of power and intersectionality.

- **Cultural sexism in organisations**: Established cultural notions of 'mateship', loyalty to the 'in-group' and merit that reinforce masculine norms and bonds. In organisations, these norms and bonds can be strong enough to maintain barriers to the advancement of women to leadership or male-dominated roles.

- **Workplace diversity and inclusion policy-outcome gap**: A disconnection and separation between diversity and inclusion discourses and practice, individual actions and systemic consequences, and those inside and outside the circles of power in organisations.

- **Shifting of leadership accountability and responsibility**: While senior leaders may support diversity, the people who champion and manage diversity and inclusion, translating policies into action and monitoring practices, are often at risk of burnout, being made redundant or resigning.

How do leadership practices prevent change?

- **Separation between internal and external diversity and inclusion strategies**: Organisations have different diversity and inclusion strategies and practices depending on whether they are addressing an internal or external 'audience'. Often, the internal diversity and inclusion practices are formal strategies and policies, dedicated diversity and inclusion positions and staff engagement activities developed to manage diversity within organisations. In contrast, the external strategies include public statements, community-based activities and attainment of awards and certifications to demonstrate symbolic inclusion and attempts at including people to increase the favourable profile of organisations. Although the external and internal strategies have different purposes, this separation becomes problematic when the different strategies do not inform each other and are underpinned by divergent representations of equality.

- **Challenges between status quo and change**: Professional and personal contexts are important in understanding and making sense of categories of difference and the expectations about how leadership should act on diversity. Leaders are appointed according to entrenched norms and practices. However, because they are seen as belonging to a valued category of difference, they may be ambivalent about advocating for change, and work to maintain the status quo. Leaders who see themselves as 'diverse' may need to do self-censoring work to fit the organisation, and navigate categories and hierarchies of difference developed to manage and contain 'diversity' in their workplace.

- **The negative and positive aspects of relationality**: Inclusive relational leadership is marked by both positive (assumed to be for the greater collective/public good) and negative (assumed to be self-interest or cronyism) aspects of relationality. Loyalty to an 'in-group' takes precedence over ensuring equity of opportunities and outcomes. Combined with a shifting of accountability and responsibility from leaders down the organisation, this places the onus of change on individuals who carry the burden of championing diversity and inclusion causes, translating policies into action and monitoring practices, at the risk of burnout.

- **Repressive equality regimes**: The suite of diversity and inclusion strategies and practices at work can control 'diversity' at all levels of organisations. It does so in a

way that can further obfuscate, depoliticise and incapacitate them. This control occurs through the:

1. **Mainstreaming** of diversity and inclusion practices and discourses that co-opts and dilute their potency.

2. **Containment** of 'diverse' staff in dedicated depoliticised roles and activities that lack the power and resources to enact change.

3. **Coercion and burdening of 'diverse' staff** into making diversity and inclusion visible and performing 'equity'.

4. **Legitimisation** of leadership because of diversity and inclusion strategies being presented or perceived as successful in increasing equal opportunities for marginalised groups, despite failing to change the status quo.

How to improve equity practices?

For Leaders. To foster the equality of diverse workforces genuinely and radically at all levels of organisations and the transformative potential of diversity and inclusion practices, leaders need to:

➔ **Understand the historical and cultural context**: Avoid implementing 'vanilla' or 'off the shelf' solutions by taking responsibility and being accountable for change as it relates to the specific cultural conditions of the organisation and how this culture has changed over time.

➔ **Become an advocate**: Seek advice and/or collaborate with diversity organisations and community groups.

➔ **Work with and across differences**: Use staff surveys to allow employees to identify with greater forms of difference (e.g., linguistic, age, ability, gender, ethnicity, birthplace) and to map the organisation's diversity in relation to hierarchy and roles.

➔ **Rethink the relationship between leaders and followers**: Be a relational leader who is open and listens to what all staff have to say, demonstrates safety for staff to interact with leaders and supports their emotional investment in the organisation.

➔ **Adopt an ethical democratic goal**: Advocate the moral case for diversity and inclusion ahead of the business and legal cases.

➔ **Disrupt the status quo**: As a leader, be prepared to stand against 'the way things are done around here' in terms of one's own actions and decisions.

For Business and Management School educators. To shape the current business practices in Australia and equip the future workforce of leaders and managers to tackle the grand challenge of diversity and inclusion, educators need to implement teaching and learning activities that develop leaders' capacity to:

➔ **Understand the historical and political context**: Embed diversity and inclusion in curriculum content and pedagogy to help future leaders understand work, management and organising as a socio-historically constructed practice. Given the Australian context, become knowledgeable, seek expertise and link to Indigenous history and struggles, and Australian multi-culturalism.

➔ **Work with and across differences**: Introduce greater complexity to the relationships between cultural norms and practices that sustain diversity categories of difference. Explore how relationships foster micro-aggressions, discrimination and workplace violence.

➔ **Rethink the relationship between leaders and followers**: Facilitate student engagement with an understanding of leadership as a relational and collective practice, rather than an individual's psychological traits, that develops and evolves according to the who, what, when and where of any given situation.

➔ **Adopt an ethical democratic goal**: Discuss the moral case for diversity as a core element of the curriculum and not simply as part of a one-off discussion about business ethics.

➔ **Disrupt the status quo**: Introduce assessment tasks that encourage students to seriously explore the benefits of business models for social justice.

For diversity and inclusion and Human Resources Management (HRM) professionals: To overcome the limits of existing diversity and inclusion strategies and practices, and move beyond advocating the business case for an inclusive and diverse workforce, diversity and inclusion and HRM professionals are encouraged to:

➔ **Define diversity as a spectrum**: Replace strategies of inclusion that focus solely on staff identification with categories of difference, with strategies that provide greater opportunities for meaningful involvement and contribution at work that values difference. Conduct regular surveys to capture the organisation's range of, and changes in, diversity, and how it is understood and valued.

➔ **Align diversity and inclusion strategies and practices vertically and horizontally**: Tailor diversity and inclusion strategies to organisation-specific workforce demographics, identified needs, expectations and interests. Raise awareness and demonstrate how corporate social responsibility strategies are related to diversity and inclusion strategies and how they can address internal gaps in representation across roles and hierarchies.

➔ **Challenge the myth of meritocracy**: Frame diversity and inclusion strategies and practices as actionable, measurable, and evidence-based opportunities and outcomes for both staff and the organisation. Move away from subjective and inconsistent merit-based perceptions of their contribution to the organisation's bottom line. Replace merit-based assessments for recruitment and promotion with assessments based on capacity and experience relative to opportunities.

➔ **Politicise diversity and inclusion practices**: Combine raising awareness about differences and celebrating diverse lived experiences with identifying and changing unfair or unequal practices and procedures. Regularly review and/or consult with staff to determine how the recruitment and promotion systems and procedures may benefit some people over others and how to remedy the disadvantage these structures support.

Introduction

'Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia' is a research project conducted between 2018 and 2021 in partnership with three Australian organisations. The project was supported by the Australian Government through an Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or the Australian Research Council.

The Chief Investigators were Professor Carl Rhodes (University of Technology Sydney) and Professor Alison Pullen (Macquarie University). Dr Celina McEwen (University of Technology Sydney) was the Senior Research Fellow and Project Manager. The research investigated the relationships between people in organisations and how they are affected by different forms of workplace diversity. It sought to recognise and mobilise the diversity of the Australian workforce and its leadership. The explicit aims were to:

- Assess how leadership is practised in the intersection of cultural and gender differences that characterise the relationships between leaders and followers as experienced in specific organisational contexts.

- Develop an empirically grounded and practically relevant theorisation of inclusive, relational leadership.

- Advance strategies for leadership practice and education that address cultural and gender diversity.

These aims were pursued using an ethnographic research approach to explore sites and data for themes and issues that emerge from practice. The research provided insights into how leadership is practised around issues of diversity. This enabled a conceptualisation of how diversity and inclusion strategies and practices can, ironically, operate to reproduce inequality rather than create genuine opportunities for progress.

What follows is a description of the context and background of the research, the research approach and a discussion of the project's results. The report presents the implications of these findings, from which a series of recommendations are developed for organisations and their leaders and for business educators to advance inclusive and equitable practices at work, and for diversity and inclusion policies that challenge the status quo.

Parts of the project were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to government and business restrictions (e.g., lockdown measures and social distancing) and the associated toll on work and personal lives, the final stages of data collection and analysis of the project were delayed.

This project would not have been possible without the participation of staff from the three Australian organisations who agreed to be part of the study. We thank participants for their generosity, interest and the confidence they placed in the project when sharing their experiences on what diversity in the workplace meant to them.

The Research Context

The 'Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality' project explored what diversity means in Australian organisations and what leaders do to manage it. The research investigated how diversity manifested for people across all levels of the organisation and how it surfaced in leaders' interactions with other leaders and staff in organisations that made an explicit commitment to improving the working conditions of members of marginalised groups—including cultural diversity and gender—in their workplaces.

Race and gender in Australian organisations

Modern Australia was built on British colonisation and its racist founding legal precept that the continent was 'terra nullius' (i.e., nobody's land), justifying the control of Indigenous peoples and the country's resources and development. To this day, colonisation is a central factor of social injustice (Griffiths et al., 2016) and racism is a barrier to formal and substantive equality for Indigenous people (Murawin Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia, 2018).

Until 1966, the White Australia Policy meant that only ethnic Europeans were allowed to immigrate (Tavan, 2005). The multiculturalism that arrived following an expanded immigration program after World War II and the development of national and state multicultural policies in the 1970s and 1980s brought new forms of racism. Since the mid-1990s, there have been sustained, and often acrimonious, debates over immigration, boat arrivals and refugees (Koleth, 2010).

In 2021, the Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner declared "racism is [still] a significant economic, social and national security threat to Australia" (AHRC, 2021, p. 4). Forty-two per cent (42%) of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers stated that they had felt excluded at work in the past 12 months because they were ignored or made invisible. Almost half (48%) of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander workers had been discriminated against or harassed, double the percentage of non-Indigenous workers (24%) (O'Leary & D'Almada-Remedios, 2019). Despite Australia being one of the most diverse workforces in the world, with 31.7% of workers born outside of the country (ABS, 2018), in 2018, senior leaders (i.e., chief executive or 'c-suite' levels) of businesses and government organisations were predominantly from an Anglo-Celtic (75.9%) or European (19%) backgrounds (Soutphommasane et al., 2018).

Evans Haussegger, Halupka & Rowe (2018, p. 12), writing on attitudes towards gender, note that "Australia is featured by complex, often contradictory value systems underpinning the gender equality debate". The country includes conservative as well as progressive views on the role and place of women in public and private spheres. However, negative traditionalist views towards women in leadership positions and the moderate views that focus on establishing women's rights that do not impinge on men's privileges remain strong. Despite a history of strong feminist movements helping to establish Australia's first female trade union in 1882 (the Tailoresses' Association of Melbourne) and securing non-Indigenous women's right to vote as early as 1895 in the state of South Australia (Victorian Women's Trust, 2021), today, "a growing number of Millennial and Gen X men appear to be alienated from the process of change and are backsliding into traditional value systems" (Evans et al., 2018, p. 50).

Notwithstanding the increasing participation of women in the workforce, with 47% of Australian workers being women (WGEA, 2018), and an equal pay rule introduced in 1972 (WGEA, 2021), in 2020, there was still, on average, a gender pay gap of 14% to the disadvantage of women (WGEA, 2020). Women only represent 13.7% of board chairs, 24.9% of directors, 16.5% of CEOs, 28.2% of directors of ASX 200 companies, 15.8% of directors of ASX 201-500

companies and 29.7% of key management personnel (AICD, Heidrick & Struggles, 2018; WGEA, 2018).

State and federal policies continue to present multiculturalism as a 'success story' (Love, 2021) and only since the election of a Labor government in 2022 are calls for a change to the Australian Constitution to allow for the redress of wrong doings perpetrated against Indigenous peoples finally being heard. This historical lack of attention and progress also relates to why equality initiatives in businesses and other workplaces has had limited success (Steinfield et al., 2019).

Leadership and diversity

Leadership and diversity have been extensively researched as independent areas of inquiry, but has only recently begun to consider "the diversity of leaders and followers in terms of culture, gender, race and ethnicity" (Eagly & Chin, 2010, p. 216; see also Ensari & Riggio, 2020). In practice leaders who come from "non-privileged, non-dominant, under-represented, disadvantaged or unusual demographic backgrounds (e.g., women, ethnic-minority and LGBT+ individuals, and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds)" are still considered 'atypical'. Moreover, these atypical leaders are incorporated into the mainstream perspective on what constitutes leadership (Samdanis and Özbilgin, 2020). The de facto situation is that how we understand leadership has an ethnocentric bias that favours Western ideas and approaches, and an implicit assumption that white men lead organisations. The current state of affairs remains one where "leadership theories continue to reflect a white, North American, heterosexual, male bias and omit dimensions of diversity in researching how leadership is exercised and the values effective leaders promote" (Joseph & Chin, 2019,p. e1).

Where culture, gender and race are explicitly accounted for in leadership, these differences are commonly isolated into particular styles such as 'Japanese leadership' and 'female leadership' (Chin, 2010). Effectively, when women and cultural minorities are considered, their differences are seen to amount to a special or aberrant case, rather than being the norm of how leadership is practised. This 'add and stir' approach to diversity reinforces gendered and cultural exclusion in leadership practice. Moreover, when organisations implement diversity management programs, these are seen as being directed at white male leaders, with women and cultural minority leaders being penalised for behaviours that value diversity (Hekman et al., 2016; McEwen et al., 2023).

It is acknowledged that leadership diversity has a significant impact on the effectiveness of work groups, and directly contributes to feelings of inclusion amongst minority group members (Meeussen et al., 2014). However, diversity management is primarily assumed to be the responsibility of the white male majority in leadership, as exemplified in Australia by the Male Champions of Change program (AHRC, 2015; Prasad et al., 2021). Focusing on white men's ability to manage the diversity of others does not represent the Australian workplace and perpetuates traditional gender and racial hierarchies. Considering Indigenous Australians in the same category as other non-white people suffers a similar fate.

Current approaches to leadership diversity and diversity management are unsatisfactory for organisations with culturally diverse workforces and high female participation. This is so because they assume that irrespective of the gendered relations inherent, every leader should 'manage like a [white] man' (cf. Wajcman, 1998; Pullen et al., 2017). Even worse, when women and non-white men enact dominant agentic behaviours associated with white masculinity, they risk direct organisational backlash (Livingston et al., 2012). Further, diversity management practices have been found to maintain inequality because they commodify, segregate and essentialise difference in a way that renders diversity work ineffective and avoids issues of power (Ahonen et al., 2014) and intersectionality (Zanoni & Janssens, 2015).

Leadership and intersectionality

In countries like Australia, which has a multicultural population and relatively high participation of women in the workforce, there has long been a "pressing need to more fully incorporate diversity into our understanding of leadership" (Day & Antonakis, 2013, p. 230). Moreover, this needs to be done in a way that acknowledges "global contexts of socio-historical asymmetries of power and engage in a work of leadership committed to social justice and equity" (Trimble & Jimenez-Luque, 2022, p. 1). Recent studies have started to address this by challenging the exclusionary ideologies on which mainstream leadership conceptualisations and practices are based (Pullen et al., 2021; Ladkin & Patrich, 2022) and calling for new and innovative ways to conceptualise and practise leadership in an increasingly diverse, multicultural society (Ahonen et al., 2014). An especially promising research direction relates to leadership and intersectionality, which has explored how leadership is practiced differently based on the intersection of multiple forms of difference, most commonly gender and race (Sanchez-Hucles and Davis, 2010).

Research investigating leadership and intersectionality has made significant inroads into understanding how racism and sexism interact to impact the experience of being a leader. Despite advances, it has also been noted that intersectional approaches to studying leadership are under-developed theoretically, with a narrow focus on predetermined categories and a lack of clarity regarding the influence of these categories on the ways that individuals make sense of their identities (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014; Pullen et al., 2021).

Intersectionality refers to how "intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life" (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 14). The term was proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in the context of critical legal studies to question how the American legal system was not able to address issues of discrimination that were neither strictly sexism nor racism, but a type of discrimination that amalgamated both. For example, as experienced by 'Black' female employees. Intersectionality focuses on political action, critical enquiry and praxis. It is also a powerful concept that can counter the apolitical simplification and homogenisation of 'otherness' that underpins the notion of diversity.

Diversity and inclusion

Most diversity management processes are adopted from a standard repertoire of interventions designed for compliance with the law. They are based on common assumptions about diversity and predefined problems and solutions, which rarely respond to the specific organisational context, including divergent perceptions about diversity and its place in organisations (Sinicropi & Cortese, 2021; Shore et al., 2018).

More recently, 'inclusion' has been coupled with 'diversity' in an attempt to address some of these implementation issues. As such, inclusion is often presented as the way to make organisational 'diversity' interventions work or a more advanced and sophisticated form of diversity management practice that considers people's experiences and sense of belonging. However, inclusive practices are also problematic because they are assumed to be positive and driven by equitable outcomes.

Focusing on white men's ability to manage the diversity of others does not represent the intersectional complexity of the Australian workplace and perpetuates traditional gender and racial hierarchies. Given the range of intersecting differences that exist among the workforce across sectors and organisations in Australia, this standpoint ignores findings that leadership diversity has a significant impact on the effectiveness of work groups, and directly contributes to

feelings of inclusion among minority group members (Meeussen et al., 2014; Jansen et al., 2016).

It is important to understand what happens when women or culturally diverse people lead organisations. Hekman et al. (2016) found that they tend to be penalised when they behave in ways that value diversity. Through leadership education, women and culturally diverse leaders will often adopt dominant Western ideas and approaches to leadership because it assumes that every leader should lead like a white man (Wajcman, 1998; Sinclair; 2014, Pullen et al., 2017). On the other hand, there may be repercussions for diverse leaders who enact dominant agentic behaviours associated with white masculinity, such as direct organisational backlash (Livingston et al., 2012).

The need for new leadership

The neglect of intersectionality in mainstream leadership theory and practice poses a significant challenge, especially in countries like Australia, with a colonial history of racial dispossession, a multicultural population and relatively high participation of women in the workforce. Mainstream perspectives on leadership remain yoked to the image of white male managers, even when women or cultural minorities occupy managerial roles. This calls for new ways of imagining and practising leadership that intrinsically account for intersectional differences in the cultural and historical contexts in which leadership is practised.

Doing the Research

The project's ethics proposal and disclosure protocol were approved in March 2019 [UTS HREC REF NO. ETH18-2728] by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committees.

Researching organisations

The research reported here was based on empirical studies of three Australian organisations. The project used the methods of workplace ethnography "to achieve a detailed understanding of the 'relational realities' of the interactors" (Crevani et al., 2010, p. 82) as it related to leadership and intersectionality. To ensure the anonymity of the organisations, pseudonyms have been used:

- Active Entertainment Subsidiary, a recreation and entertainment organisation;
- Global Services Australia, a technology sales and servicing organisation; and
- State Connect, a small community liaison state government agency.

The three organisations were selected because of their 'advanced' positions on diversity in the Australian context. Notably, the organisations were chosen as case study sites because the researchers had no prior ties with them. Diversity was a core business in only one case, but in all three cases, diversity was driven from the top as a key factor in the businesses' survival or growth.

Both Active Entertainment Subsidiary and Global Services Australia were at turning points in their corporate development and saw diversity as key in redefining their growth strategy. However, the executives' conceptualisation of diversity recruitment, retention and management differed significantly. The recreation and entertainment organisation's focus on diversity was to find a new market to support its 'aggressive growth' agenda in developing new audiences and players. For the technology organisation, diversity was a strategy to remain relevant and survive the industry's downturn.

Active Entertainment Subsidiary was a state branch of a national administering body, with its head office in Sydney and five regional offices across the state of New South Wales (NSW) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). This state branch of a well-known recreation and entertainment company had a different management style and strategic approach compared with the other state branches because of the local historical development and uptake of the game. The organisation had a rather flat structure, operated under a matrix business model, with a young workforce, including its leadership team. The executive team of six included one Pakeha New Zealander (i.e., of European descent) woman and an Irish man, both considered diverse. Active Entertainment Subsidiary was proud of its capacity to engage with many diverse cultural groups, Indigenous peoples of Australia, and to be leaders in gender equality. Their work in engaging with these different groups was recognised and rewarded in the form of several large federal and state government grants. The organisation included close to one hundred staff, not counting a large pool of casuals and an even wider staple of volunteers. Access to researching this organisation was negotiated over nine months through the diversity management manager. Negotiations included meetings with diversity management staff and the CEO, and presentation of the project to the executive team.

Global Services Australia was a national entity answerable to its parent technology company established overseas and listed on the international stock exchange. This organisation was responsible for sales/marketing, servicing and liaising with resellers across the Australia and

Pacific region and connected to a global network of similar entities. The organisation operated under the corporate model of its international parent company. It was well known in Australia for its position on corporate social responsibility (CSR). It was seen as a leader in Australia, with many awards and citations acknowledging its policy and advocacy work in Australia and outside. The organisation included close to 550 staff, excluding resellers. Access to the organisation was quickly negotiated with the head of the company and two high-ranking Human Resources Management (HRM) staff were assigned to liaise between the research team and their organisation. The executive team comprised five members including one woman.

State Connect's core business was promoting and supporting diversity in government bodies and service delivery. More specifically, its role was to provide state-based policy and translation support and services to registered organisations. It was also the point of contact between the state's Premier and various community groups. State Connect was founded five years prior to the project's commencement. The agency had emerged from the work of a long-standing commission with a mandate to work towards the state's social and cultural cohesion. Their mission placed them in the unique position of being the arbiter of 'best practice' in diversity and inclusion for all state government bodies. Although a small agency with fewer than seventy staff employed, State Connect was a highly hierarchical organisation. A team of five executives led the agency: two men of Eastern Mediterranean descent, one of whom was openly gay, and three women, one of whom had Eastern European ancestry.

Approaching the research

The research was conducted as a non-participant ethnography, with observation and interviews being the primary data collection methods. There is a long tradition of using ethnography to study workplaces and organisations and better understand the experiences and relationships of the people who work in them (Zickar & Carter, 2010). Ethnography's value is its ability to respect the knowledge and experience of people in organisations and to use that as the basis for investigating a particular problem or issue in a manner that is grounded in that experience. Ethnography takes "actual practices as the primary data for understanding how the world works" (Agar, 2010, p. 288). By immersing themselves in organisationally embedded day-to-day experiences, interactions, and practices, ethnographers can appreciate the cultural meaning of workplace relations through affective engagement with them (Gherardi, 2019).

Ethnography was especially suited to this project because it is an approach to research that enabled relationships to be understood from inside their embedded context, and on their own cultural terms, rather than those predetermined by the researchers. Participants were recruited in a similar way in the three organisations but with various levels of success. All staff were invited to take part in the project, which was explicitly presented as exploring issues of diversity in the workplace. As the aim was to understand participants' meanings, the researchers chose not to impose academic or professional definitions of diversity and intersectionality but rather to understand the different meanings participants attached to diversity. Preferring to use the meaning of those who cared to engage with the project meant that we could describe the range of meanings and practices that were at currency in the organisations. This method assisted with determining those participants who adhered to organisational discourse and those who departed from it or adopted an individual definition.

Key participants worked closely with the researchers to describe, understand and explain practices and discourses. Self-selected collaborators offered their own 'ethnographic imagination' (Atkinson, 1990) and the researchers merged collaborators' observations with their own as a process of joint inquiry (cf. Fisher, 2021). This collaborative process of uncovering and discovering meaning allowed both parties to benefit from the research work. One of these benefits was the support key participants found in using the research team to navigate

challenging work situations. Other benefits included using the team to give greater legitimacy to their work, being a 'relay baton' for those key staff exiting the organisations, and re-energising staff involved in gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

Some collaborators were reluctant to support the project, expressing concerns that their senior managers might not be willing to deal with the issues likely to be raised by the research. In most cases, however, this was overcome once collaborators experienced the relational approach of the researchers. Because the research used flexible, adaptable, culturally sensitive and capacity-building processes to ensure relevant outcomes for the organisation and staff, many collaborators remained invested in the project even beyond their initial role in the organisation. The relationships mobilised, and the alliances forged through this collaboration supported the joint construction of knowledge about the range of diversity practices in the workplace. Also, it supported the production and assembling of methodological insights about the impact of the researchers' presence and approaches, including potential intersectionality, on collaborators and the organisational culture investigated.

Engaging with research participants

Data were collected from 69 participants employed at all levels of the organisations. At Active Entertainment Subsidiary 31 people were interviewed out of 97 staff, at Global Services Australia, 25 people were interviewed out of 537 staff, and at State Connect 13 people were interviewed out of 70 staff. Most interviewees took part in one interview. Follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify certain points or when interviewees expressed the need to provide additional information.

A semi-structured interview approach was used to listen to staff's understanding of what diversity meant to them, their organisation's diversity policies and strategies to be, and how these affected them in their everyday work. To question any dominant corporate meanings of diversity, key questions were used, such as, "What or who is driving the diversity agenda?" Questions were also designed specifically for each organisation, such as in the context of Active Entertainment Subsidiary, "What would it take for the next CEO to be an Indigenous Australian woman?", and at Global Services Australia, researchers asked how the motto of the company was reflected in practice.

The interviews were between 30 and 90 minutes long and were transcribed verbatim. This dataset was complemented by an online questionnaire administered at State Connect (8 completed surveys) as the beginning of the pandemic interrupted the interview schedule and staff's capacity to take part in interviews.

Typically, the interview program in each organisation started with the executive and senior management teams to develop an understanding of the organisation's diversity policies and perception of practices at all levels of the organisation. These were then followed by interviews with staff at all levels to elicit rich stories of their experiences of diversity in the workplace and their perceptions of how leadership worked with and through diversity.

Non-participant observations were made of day-to-day interactions, work activities, meetings, and other formal and semi-formal work interactions. Interviews and observation sessions were conducted face-to-face and via online videoconferencing systems. Field notes in the form of narrative accounts were made to record details and impressions of these events and document how staff related to each other through normal working life and relationships. Additional notes were made about unfolding events and key changes that occurred within the organisations during and up to six months post-data collection. Further notes about the researchers' engagement with the organisations, participants and other research team members were taken

to account for events and reflect on changes that could be seen as emerging from these relationships.

Key organisational documents (e.g., policies, plans and organisational charts) were reviewed and used to provide a more comprehensive picture of the organisation. Organisational data already collected through human resources instruments (e.g., exit interviews and staff satisfaction surveys) were also included in the analysis to provide another perspective and counter the potential effects of recruiting volunteers who were 'converted' to the cause.

Making sense of it all

All data were de-identified using pseudonyms, safely stored and only accessible to the researchers. The different datasets were used to complement and cross-reference each other. The researchers discussed notes and emerging themes. A thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017) was used to examine the rich qualitative datasets gathered across the three research sites. Specifically, data from notes, de-identified interviews, surveys, observations and documents were sorted and clustered, by applying a commonly used qualitative analysis software, NVivo12. Interview, survey and observation data were coded according to five categories that emerged from a concept mapping of these datasets. The five categories were: actors, attitudes, definitions, experiences and activities. The coding revealed key themes and sub-themes. Some of these themes were: categories and hierarchies of diversity, cultural sexism in organisations, shifting leadership accountability and responsibility, and workplace diversity and inclusion policy-outcome gap. Concept maps were also used to highlight key elements of the discourse and terms used in the corporate diversity and inclusion documents.

The team collectively reflected on and made sense of the themes and sub-themes using Kemmis' (2009) Theory of Practice Architecture (TPA). The TPA is a broad framework for the analysis of "complex bundlings [sic] of arrangements of mediating preconditions of practice—ways of saying, doing and relating, and objects and setups with which people in the setting interact" (Kemmis, 2009, p. 34). It highlights that regardless of different practice theory approaches, what all practices have in common is that they are revealed through or mediated by the 'doings' (e.g., activities, work, setup), 'sayings' (e.g., discourse, language) and 'relatings' (e.g., social connections, power) of individuals and groups. The TPA also helped surface salient aspects of practice at the macro, meso and micro levels of the organisations, and reveal the effects of a range of mechanisms or 'arrangements' on diversity and inclusion practices and various employees.

What Gets in the Way of Progress?

Despite each of the case study organisations being regarded as leaders in diversity management, our research revealed that further progress was limited by four common factors:

- **Categories and hierarchies of diversity**: Organisational categories developed to manage and contain various forms of diversity that are not designed to address issues of power and intersectionality.

- **Cultural sexism in organisations**: Established cultural notions of 'mateship', loyalty to the 'in-group' and merit that reinforce masculine norms and bonds. In organisations, these norms and bonds can be strong enough to maintain barriers to the advancement of women to leadership or male-dominated roles.

- **Workplace diversity and inclusion policy-outcome gap**: A disconnection and separation between diversity and inclusion discourses and practice, individual actions and systemic consequences, and those inside and outside the circles of power in organisations.

- **Shifting of leadership accountability and responsibility**: While senior leaders may support diversity, the people who champion and manage diversity and inclusion, translating policies into action and monitoring practices, are often at risk of burnout, being made redundant or resigning.

Each of these categories is explored below.

Categories and hierarchies of diversity

In all three case study organisations, when under pressure to widen the representation of senior executives to reflect the broader diversity of the Australian population, the executives appointed women to senior positions. At State Connect the diverse leadership included male and female executives considered culturally diverse. This cultural diversity was associated with women from a second-generation migrant background, with Eastern Mediterranean and Eastern European family backgrounds. State Connect also employed one culturally diverse male executive who was also a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community.

Despite being visibly different from the usual dominant white male executive type, gender and culturally diverse leaders had similar social class attributes to their white/male colleagues. Typical characteristics included having been educated in an elite Australian University and living in affluent suburbs of Australia. Women in senior leadership positions were expected to 'play the game' in terms of behaving in ways consistent with the historical 'white male' norm. Women were actively discouraged from challenging dominant practices and privilege. The most extreme example of this was in Global Services Australia where, during our research, the only woman on the senior executive team was asked to leave the organisation when she actively sought to reveal and address sexist cultural practices in the organisation.

Women who did not 'play the game' reported being blocked from progressing beyond a certain level of the organisational hierarchy and from having access to professional development opportunities because they did not have the 'right' cultural fit. For example, women with diverse cultural backgrounds employed at State Connect commonly accepted opportunities to 'act' in more senior oppositions without subsequently being appointed permanently to them.

The research showed that there was a hierarchy of diversity and that who was considered diverse changed over time and according to the context (e.g., the organisation, industry and/or profession). For example, at Active Entertainment Subsidiary, women and Australian Indigenous people were considered diverse. Women were included as a diversity group because they had been a minority in this male-dominated industry. While Indigenous people were seen as diverse because they were represented more highly in the organisation than in the general population. These two groups were followed by 'multicultural' and 'disability' in the priority listing of categories of difference. Another reason for these groups' inclusion was the availability of government and philanthropic funds to increase their participation in the sector:

> you would have heard about the [X] program that we run out in Western Sydney. So, that effectively employs three of those Indigenous people and they wouldn't be employed if it wasn't for the fact that government gives us money to run that program.
> (Robert, Senior HR Manager)

In comparison, women were the primary diversity focus of Global Services Australia followed by ethnicity, sexuality, refugee status and disability. These categories had emerged because of the personal interests of the CEO and a group of 'champions':

> And I would like to think that I'm somebody that supports those principles and lives by those principles. And had them instilled in me by my mother when I was little. And, you know, all that sort of very early fundamental, sort of life-forming views, I guess are there. And it would seem like a betrayal of what I understand being a decent human being means if I did not propagate greater diversity through the organisation.
> (Cameron, CEO)

At Global Services Australia the focus on specific categories of diversity in employment was seen as a competitive advantage.

The results highlight that diversity categories and hierarchies are categories used in organisations to manage and contain various forms of difference for the benefit of the organisation itself. It is worth noting that addressing issues of intersectionality, power imbalance, injustice and discrimination did not feature as a reason to promote diversity in leadership.

Cultural sexism in organisations

The research showed that a focus on improving the representation of women in senior leadership positions was a strong focus in the case study organisations. Despite this increase in representation, the research also found that sexist cultural practices remained strong enough to maintain barriers to the advancement of women into leadership and male-dominated roles, and to the sustained employment of women in senior positions.

Global Services Australia was a pointed case because of the sexist recruitment practices in certain parts of the organisations. Cronyism was reported consistently in the Sales Division, where male senior leaders preferentially recruited their male 'mates' over women. As one of the participants reported:

> We're still hearing about sales especially, recruiting old mates from the industry. [...] we exist in an industry where it tends to be - it's definitely eighty per cent male, especially in sales, and that they really value industry experience. So, they won't look outside of the industry and go 'this female, she's been a great manager in telco. Like, [...] it's transferable'. [...] you don't want to start pushing the boundaries of what's transferable or not. You want to say this is my mate, he's been in the industry. He knows these fifty customers that have a loyal following of him and he'll

be able to bring them all over.
(Betty, Compliance Manager)

At State Connect, the CEO also hired his 'mates' and 'connections' from his professional, political and personal network. At Active Entertainment Subsidiary, instances of sexism in recruitment practices were reported, especially at the entry-level. A few staff found that young women seemed to be turned down in favour of the "same people employed really, white males" (Francis, Manager). Although a discourse of merit circulated in the organisation, it was also evident to some that merit and latent selection criteria tended to favour men and reinforce masculine cultural norms:

> *[Active Entertainment Subsidiary] has […] invested money in training and development and all of those things to make their female candidates to be able to stack up against a male candidate and then be chosen on merit. So, I'm a big fan of calling it out, putting it out there and making it top of mind for everyone. I still think that women in the industry struggle with the intangibles, so the [game] talk, or I was a part of that team and I kicked [x] on that guy, whatever it was. As a female in the business, you don't have those sorts of intangible connections. So, you have to potentially work harder on your relationships.*
> (David, Marketing Director)

Active Entertainment Subsidiary was in a historically male-dominated industry and the legacy of this was that the regional offices were still principally staffed with men. At Global Services Australia, when it came to service and repair work, the perceived requirement for muscular strength to move the machines meant that the profession had a long history of being dominated by men. In this context, women were seen as not physically suited to doing the work. This perception continued despite new technology and equipment obviating the need to physically carry machines as part of their work. Culturally, technician and sales roles were often dominated by men with outcome-driven priorities. Governance roles aimed at ensuring compliance and ethical processes were more commonly filled by women. Tensions arose between these two groups at Active Entertainment Subsidiary. These tensions were experienced as a clash of values and ethics between men and women, with men perceiving that they were being 'policed' by the women. As a form of retaliation, women reported being subjected to sexist acts by some of the men, ranging from jokes to aggressive stances and pressure to resign.

Frequently, sexism was reported as being overlaid with racism, highlighting how intersectionality materialised in the workplace. For example, although the CEO of State Connect had appointed women to the executive team, these women excluded the self-identified 'brown' women:

> *it's affecting all of us. Even if you ask, you know, the Head of HR, [Shiva]. I guess that she's been kind of included, kind of excluded. That she's a smart woman from an Indian background and she's always being treated like the last wheel.*
> (Mina, Officer)

In Active Entertainment Subsidiary, the only Indigenous woman in a position of leadership in the parent company talked about discriminatory treatment from her male peers in the industry and their cultural groups:

> *to be honest most of them are smug arseholes who look down at me like I'm not - I get often treated by some club CEOs, some club presidents, some state managers and their staff like I'm not really on the exec. I don't get treated with the same respect as my peers by some of them and partly it's obviously I'm Black, partly it's I'm a woman.*
> (Harriet, National Director)

Across all three organisations, there was a tension between the representation of women and cultural minorities in leadership practices and the cultural dominance of white masculinity. This

meant that even where some diversity was achieved in terms of representation, it was not followed by cultural change or inclusion.

Workplace Gender, Diversity and Inclusion policy-outcome gap

The gap between what was promised in diversity and inclusion policy and what was achieved in practice was a problem in the three organisations. The three organisations had an array of policies in place to ensure equal opportunities and the treatment of staff. These policies were designed by Human Resource Management professionals and approved by executive team members. Staff at lower levels of the organisations were expected to adhere to these policies, and many cases complied. Yet, there was a disconnection between rhetoric and practice, with little evidence of diversity and inclusion discourses materialising into aspired-to or proclaimed equality change.

In principle, diversity and inclusion strategies were supported by the staff of the three organisations, at least in terms of the business case for market growth, competitive advantage, or employee satisfaction. However, not all staff aligned their activities to the strategies in their everyday work. There were several reasons for this lack of support. Some staff disagreed with diversity and inclusion activities because of a lack of ownership, feeling that it has been imposed on them by people in positions of authority. Others felt that diversity and inclusion practices were an imposition on their ways of 'doing things' and on their professional agency. Other staff resisted or undermined diversity and inclusion activities because of their professional culture or because supervisors tended to trivialise them, as reflected in the comment below:

> I think some of them view females as you know, they'll employ very attractive
> females and diversity of age. So now we have our general manager saying, 'oh we
> just want all young people'. I'm sitting there thinking, 'well actually so it's all right
> just because that guy there, who's dad you happen to know because again another
> rugby mate or something.
> (Nadege, Senior Manager, Global Services Australia)

Some staff perceived diversity and inclusion activities as not important or a threat to their status and position in the organisation's hierarchy. Others resisted these approaches as a show of loyalty or allegiance to people in positions of influence who were not supportive. Another reason for the policy-outcome gap was found in how policies were open to interpretation or designed with an externally facing organisational focus. For example, at State Connect, all diversity and inclusion strategies had been designed for their client-base and seldom applied to their internal practice.

The translation of diversity and inclusion messages from the top of Global Services Australia into concrete activities seemed to be lost in the middle or at the third tier of the hierarchy. This was possibly because they felt that diversity and inclusion strategies were a sign of the CEO projecting his personal preferences and politics onto the organisation. In practice, the complexities of the organisation were not accounted for by standardized, albeit well-intentioned, diversity and inclusion strategies. This suggests a managerial lack of understanding of workforce diversity issues and strategies. Despite resistance at a middle management level, Human Resource Management professionals and diverse members of staff took it upon themselves to organise diversity and inclusion activities (e.g., committees and harmony day) for all staff to participate in. The lack of engagement from middle managers in diversity and inclusion strategic activities also meant that they did not engage in two-way communication about the impact of policies and practices between leaders and other staff.

The diversity and inclusion policies and practices in the case study organisations enabled the shifting of responsibility for change onto the 'other' and the separation between individual action and systemic inequality. This was evident, for example, in the effect of diversity and inclusion

training on the leadership team at State Connect. Despite having undertaken the training, the CEO remained blind to how his professional development practices were excluding a large group of staff (e.g., 'brown' women) from ever progressing beyond low-level management positions.

Leadership accountability and responsibility

The commitment of the case study organisations to leadership diversity and inclusion proved to be both inconsistent and rife with conflict. One example of conflicting practice was how an outwardly focused diversity and inclusion practice, projecting the image of an organisation that cares for 'others' and social justice issues, did not necessarily translate into upholding those equity values and practices internally. This was evidenced in all three organisations. At Active Entertainment Subsidiary being seen as progressive in encouraging women and Indigenous people to participate in the game (e.g., as spectators, referees, club members or players) was seen as equivalent to establishing progressive diversity and inclusion practices in the workplace. This was because it was assumed there would be an automatic flow-on effect from the field into the office:

> it's a generational thing. I think in 10 or 15 years those, especially the young
> African refugees that started to move to [regional city] about 10 years ago through
> our program, you see a lot of those guys that have gone all through our junior
> [recreation] now, they're going onto employment, they're synched into the local
> community, I think it's those types of guys and girls that are going through now that
> we're looking to hopefully employ.
> (George, Manager).

Some of the Global Services Australia executives understood their CSR strategy as addressing internal and external diversity and inclusion matters. For others, CSR was perceived as an externally facing marketing exercise designed to increase their reputation as an industry leader. As one participant suggested: "diversity is probably a real key thing for us to be able to understand the full market we go to" (Jarod, Technician). This illustrates a lack of concern with diversity's political and ethical grounding, and its integration into corporate strategy. Another participant criticized this, saying:

> we have this great window dressing. We're WGEA [Workplace Gender Equality
> Agency Certification], we're this, we're that. People are held up and go off to this,
> but behind the scenes, I can tell you it's nothing like that.
> (Nadege, Senior Manager, Global Services Australia)

At State Connect, their work as the agency responsible for ensuring that all state bodies were culturally sensitive seemed to give permission to the CEO *not* to deploy any additional efforts to uphold the same high standards internally. The leadership role in terms of diversity and inclusion was, by and large, assumed to be limited to giving their approval for and delegating to other parts of the organisation to develop strategies and policies, convert them into practice, and then monitor and respond to recurring issues and emerging conflicts. All case study leaders adopted this role regardless of whether they were from the dominant social class of heteronormative Anglo-Celtic males or not. In all three sites, the executives perceived the role of giving approval for the organisation to invest some of its staff's time in diversity and inclusion practices as progressive. Further, because their strategies and practices were recognised through awards and citations, and they were seen as a reference point to follow in their fields and beyond, this role sometimes was perceived as heroic:

> [Global Services Australia] has an amazing reputation. I mean, the reason I took
> the job is because [Global Services Australia]'s reputation and the reputation of our
> [CEO] in this area. So, [Global Services Australia] three, four years ago decided to

> *launch an ethical sourcing program in a vacuum where there was no imperative to
> do so. Because it was the right thing to do, because they had an altruistic motive.*
> (Dina, Manager)

Delegating to other parts of the organisation meant that separate areas were responsible for different aspects of diversity and inclusion policies and practices, making a wholistic and systemic change near impossible. This delegation of function also implied a delegation of responsibility and accountability. Moreover, leaders' hands-off and/or leading-at-a-distance approach to diversity and inclusion was problematic because it meant that leaders were either unaware of the reality of diversity and inclusion practices in their organisation or that these approaches permitted them not to see some of the problems with the policies and practices.

In instances where leaders had experienced discrimination, such as Global Services Australia's female executive or State Connect's culturally diverse and gay executive, they either censured themselves or were silenced by the rest of the executive team members. The consequences of breaking the silence included exhaustion and burnout, being made redundant through various restructuring strategies, and leaving the organisation. At Global Services Australia, the female executive who complained to the CEO about sexist practices within the organisation was pressured into resigning from her position. Some of her direct female reports who had expressed similar concerns about an organisational culture that tolerated sexist and racist practices soon after also involuntarily exited the company.

At State Connect, self-proclaimed 'brown' women employed at the lower levels of the hierarchy, who complained about how the organisation discriminated against 'women of colour', found themselves labelled 'troublemakers' and limited in their professional development and progression opportunities:

> *There's been a lot of these things where I've spoken up, and some colleagues
> have spoken up because we were frustrated, but I'm mindful that we're seen as
> troublemakers.*
> (Tasha, Officer).

> *if you can't even advocate for yourself, and you're so exhausted, and I'm being
> seen as a – they tell me I'm a disrupter, I'm a troublemaker, because I make these
> comments. I've got to [call] the Employee Assistance Program to learn about more
> effective ways to talk about this. […] they literally told me they were punishing me
> because I went to HR for an issue that I was more in my right to ask for.*
> (Damsa, Officer)

Although Damsa invested a lot of energy in educating the organisation's leaders on issues of intersectionality and rallying more women of 'colour' to her cause, she eventually left the organisation. She reported being burnt out and resenting the compliant behaviour of those most impacted by intersectionality. Also, she felt uneasy about the contradictions she saw between the leaders' actions, especially the women and/or culturally diverse or LGBTQIA+, and the aims of the organisation:

> *there is great hypocrisy in the organisation in what it is supposed to do and deliver.
> They try to look like they are supporting and advancing diversity but internally they
> are only advancing their own professional/personal/political agendas and treating
> CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] workers terribly and disrespectfully.*
> (Damsa, Officer)

Another type of conflicting practice that emerged in the research pertained to the negative aspects of relationality and how they affected leaders' responses to allegations of discrimination. For example, as mentioned before, when the problematic practices of executives and middle managers were reported by the only female executive to the CEO of Global Services Australia, she suffered the consequences of being pressured to resign her position.

She also saw the top tier of the organisation divide along the loyalty lines staff felt towards the female executive or the alleged perpetrator group with whom the CEO had aligned himself.

Although appearing paradoxical, these conflicting leadership practices maintained the status quo and shifted responsibility for change and accountability from organisational to individual and from the top to the bottom tier of the organisation. This shift in responsibility is at the risk of those individuals that carry the burden of championing diversity and inclusion causes, translating policies into action and monitoring practices, as is often the case in community-based work. Some of the risks include personal burnout and stress, but also damage to credibility and reputation because of the lack of change and/or retaliation in the form of discrimination and/or loss of employment.

The Challenge of Leadership Diversity and Intersectionality

The results of this research reveal how leadership is practised under the premise of attending to the increasingly diverse workforce while connecting this to organisational effectiveness and competitiveness. The analysis highlights how organisational leadership can fail to live up to the expectations of increasing inclusion and harnessing diversity at all levels of organisations, even when leadership is itself diverse. Building on these findings, this section of the report unpacks the implications of the results for leadership practice.

Leadership diversity: Challenges between change and status quo

The research explored the complexity involved in practising leadership with and across relationships between leaders and followers that are marked by cultural and gender differences. Theories and approaches to leadership that move beyond masculine and Western norms are required to address the realities of these workplace interactions (Joseph and Chin, 2019, p. e1). Leadership theories and approaches need to be underpinned by more nuanced notions of diversity that are complex (i.e., without recourse to simple stereotypes) and practices that are informed by experiential interaction with the multiplicity of differences. The three case studies show that there were different kinds of relationships with diversity at play. They point to a close link between forms of diversity, the organisational issues arising around diversity practices and experiences, and individual responses to these issues. One issue common to all three organisations was the schism between how diversity is constructed through policies, discourses and practices, and how staff respond to it individually or as a collective (e.g., resistance, mobilisation, indifference).

While not able to make a generalisable assessment as to how leadership is practised at the intersection of cultural and gender differences, it did provide insight into the challenges faced by leaders who practised under intersecting diversity labels. These included an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female executive at Active Entertainment Subsidiary's parent company, a culturally diverse woman in a senior management position at Global Services Australia, and a gay man with a culturally diverse background in an executive position at State Connect. The two female leaders were in diversity or Human Resource Management positions. Both women advocated for change that challenged their organisation's strategic use of diversity as a competitive advantage. In the case of the female executive in the parent company of Active Entertainment Subsidiary, she often felt that because of her gender and cultural background she was not an equal member of the executive team:

> As this organisation has often been accused of being full of white men from privileged backgrounds, doing the opposite on the side of gender isn't helpful. Sadly, a lot of other senior women in the business from my perspective are incredibly conservative and fit into the culture here much better than I do.
> (Harriet, National Director)

As discussed earlier, the decisions this executive made within her portfolio were challenged in the board room and public office roles.

The female executive at Global Services Australia who was actively championing gender equality voiced her disapproval of some of her peers' sexist and bullying attitudes. Her challenging of the status quo had a detrimental effect, as it resulted in the immediate

termination of her employment contract. As for the female senior manager at Global Services Australia, her close relationship with the female executive who called out sexist practices made her the target of bullying by some of her peers and executive team members. She too left the organisation soon after her supervisor.

None of the other female or culturally diverse executives in the other two sites advocated for any form of diversity. At State Connect, the CEO, who was considered culturally diverse by the executive, had appointed women to executive roles who were seen as white and with a similar educational background to his own. Some staff had called out this practice as a case of discrimination, where 'brown' women were prevented from being promoted to executive positions. Although the other male executive was more sympathetic to issues of intersectionality and justice, he did not actively defend them, because his main interest was in advancing the cause of LGBTQIA+ people as a new diversity group for the organisation to focus on.

Professional and personal contexts are important in understanding the level of sophistication of making sense of diversity and the expectations about how leadership should act. This applies especially to those appointed because they are seen as belonging to a valued category of difference. For instance, at State Connect, there was a divide between the executives' opinions and practices of diversity and other staff. The CEO had imported his understanding of diversity from his previous organisation, which focused on the diversity of thought and the promotion of women. Whereas staff at lower levels with experiences of marginalisation and professional backgrounds in community engagement or social policies held more sophisticated views about diversity:

> *[the CEO] says diversity is about diversity of thought. I've actually said to him, well diversity of thought comes from diversity of experiences and diversity of experience is different from a person and I, I now say, of colour.*
> (Shiva, Senior Manager)

> *[the CEO] said, diversity's not about culture, it's about thinking. […] who brings different thinking? Different classes; different genders; different religions; lived in different countries; different ages; that's what brings diversity of thought.*
> (Damsa, Officer)

Shiva and Damsa's views were informed by their lived experience and notions of power and intersectionality. This meant that although the CEO had been promoting and appointing women to the executive team, this was not seen as progressive by other staff. The field was already highly feminised, and staff had seen and experienced the intersectional dynamics of the workplace and how it operated to block certain people from being recruited and promoted upwards. However, at Global Services Australia, similar policies developed for the advancement of women were seen as progressive, albeit not necessarily well implemented, because of the lack of female leadership in the organisation and the industry.

The research findings provided insight into the formation of different diversity practices and how people mobilise against perceived inequalities. The practice of diversity was shown to be shaped by an organisation's structures and informed by individuals' personal lived experiences, identity work, positionality, capacity to act for change and ability to bear the consequences of such actions. For example, being perceived as diverse when in a mainstream organisational leadership role brings a suite of struggles. There are struggles around the need to construct or align their professional practice according to dominant leadership practices and the need to navigate their divergent and/or multiple identities. Such challenges are compounded by the organisational categories and hierarchies of difference developed to manage and contain 'diversity' at work. This is because leaders who see themselves as diverse may need to engage in self-censorship work (e.g., not speaking up about issues of discrimination and/or not championing causes that bring attention to their visible or invisible differences) to confirm their loyalty to the executive group over their potential loyalty to a specific diversity group.

Inclusive relational leadership: Negative and positive aspects

Relational leadership theories were developed as a counterpoint to ideas of heroic leadership and individual agency. These theories offered a new way of conceptualising leadership as emerging in and constructed through the everyday interactions between leaders and followers (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). They assume relationality to be reciprocal, dialogical, and plural, but also centred on trust, moral order and alterity (Gergen, 2011; Topolski, 2015). Relationality is, therefore, often assumed to be positive. It refers to leadership for good and social justice. Ford (2019) raises the issue, however, that the traditional relational leadership approach fails to acknowledge the power differential between leaders and followers. As Tilly (1998) explained, relationality is not necessarily a positive interaction. For example, it can be said that inequality is relational as it requires a close relationship between at least two groups of people to exploit and be exploited.

The project, however, shows that relational aspects of leadership can be both inclusive or positive (assumed to be for the greater collective/public good) and exclusive or negative (assumed to be self-interest or cronyism). The research found that relational leadership practices tended to favour 'mateship' or loyalty to an 'in-group' over ensuring equity of opportunities and outcomes. For example, at Global Services Australia, men were hired in sales positions because of their social and occupational networks. The result was that men were hired instead of women who may have been more competent but were outside of the privileged networks of the sales team. Similarly, at Active Entertainment Subsidiary, the recreation industry was the default recruitment channel for recruiting positions at the top. At State Connect, the CEO hired colleagues from his former workplace into senior positions before promoting existing staff, including those already acting in these positions.

Another negative aspect of relational leadership practice emerged around how inclusion policies and strategies were used as a commodity for career progression and business growth. Evidence of the use of inclusion as a commodity was even found to be enacted by leaders seen as diverse. Working at State Connect, with its focus on diversity, provided an opportunity for the new CEO, who considered himself culturally diverse, to step into the public sector and the most senior executive role. For non-diverse leaders, examples of the use of 'inclusion' as a commodity included the CEO of Active Entertainment Subsidiary who engaged with diversity to prove his worth as an executive in the national office. Indeed, gender and diversity programs were significant strategies used to 'grow' its audience and client-base in a more successful way than any of its other competitors (other state-based organisations):

> the growth we're seeing in female [recreation] has been unbelievable and we're
> second - we've got more female players in NSW than any other state other than
> Victoria which is incredible for a non-traditional market.
> (Grant, CEO).

At Global Services Australia, the diversity strategies were part of a wider CSR strategy that allowed the CEO to increase his status and legitimacy as a benevolent public figure and industry leader:

> [CEO] is a very visible figurehead, yeah. So, he's got a really high personal profile
> in the business […]. I think that he's a really great leader for that, people like to
> follow a leader that means something and I just, I think he's wonderful. I think a lot
> of people do love working here because of him.
> (Rosemary, Senior Manager).

One more negative aspect of relationality in inclusive leadership practices was how leaders were able to shift the accountability and responsibility for diversity and inclusion practices down the organisation. By relying on their positive relationships with some staff and the passion or

goodwill of others for the various causes of diversity and inclusion or CSR, leaders could contain their role to approving or ratifying the introduction of diversity and inclusion policies. This meant that the burden of championing diversity and inclusion causes, translating policies into action and monitoring practices, was carried by individuals lower down the hierarchy, often in addition to their normal work. In some cases, staff seen as diverse and willing to contribute became 'mascots' of 'diversity'.

Gender, Diversity and Inclusion at work

Although the researchers anticipated positive relational outcomes about how people work together in organisations that have advanced diversity and inclusion practices, the findings highlighted ongoing tokenism and practices of exclusion at the leadership level. Drawing on Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes and Marcuse's (1969) ideas on repressive tolerance in action, led to a consideration of how the case organisations reflected 'repressive equality regimes' where it was the idea of what constituted equality that prevented progress.

The concept of 'inequality regimes' explains the generation of inequality in organisations (i.e., bases, shape, degree, visibility, and legitimacy), along the lines of gender and class. Repressive tolerance helps to explain how the mainstreaming process of tolerance of 'others', through discourses, policies and activities, serves to reinforce the status quo and further support dominant practices and ideas. The project's global findings show that diversity and inclusion practices reinforce the status quo by supporting dominant discourses that depoliticise the need for change and add to the legitimisation of dominant Western forms of management and leadership. The analysis points to major factors that continued to hinder the efficacy or transformative aims of diversity and inclusion strategies and practices:

- structural barriers to increasing diversity across levels and roles.

- sexist, misogynistic, racist organisational cultures that not only block progression and development, but also push people to exit.

- lack of skills and experience to relate to diversity and manage discrimination.

- responsibility for implementing, improving and monitoring diversity and inclusion resting on the shoulders of those with little authority to enact change (e.g., HRM departments and diversity and inclusion committees).

- lack of leadership accountability to act beyond the policy work and to bring about change in the organisation.

- passive bystander or lack of active allyship.

The paradox of why and how equality interventions can reproduce inequality is fundamental to addressing how inequality in organisations is reproduced through the mainstreaming of equity discourses and practices for employees seen as belonging to a range of categories of difference. This paradox is named 'repressive equality regimes' (McEwen et al., in progress), and defined as:

> *The organizational diversity and inclusion practices, policies and structures that demonstrate an organization's engagement with issues of equality, but remain wedded to the conceptual, relational, material and structural conditions that perpetuate historically dominant and legitimized, and fundamentally unequal, social and organizational practices, norms, hierarchies and bodies.*

Repressive equality regimes are characterised by diversity and inclusion practices, policies and structures that, while showing organisational engagement with issues of equality, remain part of the structural conditions that perpetuate historically dominant social and organisational

practices, norms, hierarchies and hierarchies and bodies. More specifically, an organisation's policies, committees, awards, activities, and positions can create a smokescreen that hides the ongoing problems of inequality and structural discrimination that occurs in organisations along single and multiple axes of difference. The ways organisations increasingly engage with diversity and equality can hide the fact that these forms of engagement are used to contain 'diversity'. In some cases, people labelled as diverse are moved into powerless positions, and the noise generated around diversity and inclusion covers the sounds of discord, especially around issues of intersectionality.

Repressive equality regimes are, therefore, diversity and inclusion strategies and practices that control and coerce 'diverse' staff into performing 'equity' at strategic and operational levels of organisations in a way that further contains, obscures, burdens, co-opts, depoliticises and incapacitates those members of staff. Repressive equality regimes operate through:

1. the mainstreaming of diversity and inclusion practices that reduce their potential efficacy by placing them in unequal competition for attention against other business imperatives;

2. the ways in which inclusion strategies and practices contain 'diverse' staff by using their bodies to make diversity and inclusion visible and, thus, into performative roles of 'equity';

3. the design and position of diversity and inclusion strategies that aligns dominant Western and masculine forms of management and leadership.

Inequality is maintained because diversity and inclusion strategies and practices are framed by a liberal egalitarian model that serves the interests of those in positions of power. Because staff supporters of diversity and inclusion played according to fraught rules, their equality projects tended to be oppressive. This aligns with Marcuse's (1969) more general observation that: "within a repressive society, even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game" (p. 83). Moreover, although well-intentioned, there is a danger that diversity and inclusion practices and strategies can only be accepted if they do not interfere with the liberties of senior managerial style and prerogative. The 'realpolitik' of diversity and inclusion is that when equality interferes with their liberty, it then becomes objectionable to those in positions of authority (Scanlon, 2018).

Ensuring that equal opportunities and outcomes are not objectionable requires changing how organisations operate, noting that the visibility difference are not equivalent to genuine inclusion of diversity and 'others' in their own terms (Tyler, 2019). The statement below by a research participant illustrates the failure of diversity and inclusion to make sustained or systemic changes.

> *Cultural diversity as in, I guess multiculturalism, again, we're doing a lot with program delivery, but the broader advocacy statement is not there. So, as I've worked through this multicultural strategy in the last 12 months, I've realised that this place really does operate on numbers and not humans […] There's nothing in there to address […] the negative sentiment towards national groups, which are highest in the communities which we're trying to target.*
> (Hannah, National Diversity Manager, parent company of Active Entertainment Subsidiary)

A change towards greater inclusion requires structural reforms and a commitment from leaders to establish mutual trust and lines of responsibility (Ray & Purifoy, 2019). It also requires making inequalities highly visible and showing the illegitimacy of these practices through social and theoretical mobilisation and agitation (Acker, 2006). To be inclusive, the diversity of all staff must be considered and responsibility for diversity needs to be recognised as belonging to

everybody. This requires bottom-up as well as top-down diversity interventions that effectively manage what diversity is and show that it is valued.

Conclusion and Recommendations: What Can Be Done?

The research reported here found that even for organisations that explicitly support diversity and inclusion, how leadership is practised at the intersection of cultural and gender differences can prevent progress. In the three organisations studied, leaders who visibly embodied diversity were accepted at the executive table if they behaved according to the dominant Western masculine style of leadership and were loyal to the dominant values and interests of the leadership group. The findings also showed that regardless of organisations being highly hierarchical or having a rather flat structure, the relationships between leaders and followers remained stratified, often along the lines of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, but more so according to social class.

Despite the difficulties experienced around diversity in the workplace, participants shared with the researchers their hopes for change, especially change driven by an evidence-based approach. Such an approach was valued as a means to help improve interpersonal relations and the broken trust, and to develop a clear vision for the organisation. More specifically, there was hope that the findings from the project would provide evidence about recurring issues, as well as how to address them.

The barriers to achieving diversity in organisations, especially in leadership positions, are significant. Assuming that a simple set of policies and practices can solve the diversity 'problem' is not only naive but contributes to the deterioration of advocating for change and internally managing diversity and inclusion. It is only by accepting the true scope of the challenge and making an embedded and long-term commitment to overcoming it that organisations can make real progress.

To advance strategies for leadership education and practice that address diversity and inclusion requires disrupting privilege in advancing fair and just workplaces. This is a primarily political rather than managerial responsibility that would transform the relationship between leaders and followers. Central to this is identifying, disrupting and replacing the 'repressive equality regimes' that can support diversity and inclusion in principle, but obscure structural inequalities in practice.

To disrupt repressive equality regimes, inclusive leadership practices need to be grounded in an understanding of leadership and inclusion as a relational and political practice and a commitment to ethics and social justice. The following recommendations are presented to facilitate change at the executive level of organisations and to ensure positive outcomes of diversity and inclusion strategies and practices, including equitable access to opportunities for staff labelled as diverse.

Leadership practices and education

To develop leadership practices that genuinely and radically foster equality of a diverse workforce at all levels of organisations and the transformative potential of diversity and inclusion practices, systemic change is required. A strong commitment to change and responsibility to establish greater equity at all levels of organisations, and across institutions, sectors and geographies.

However, there is also a need for a robust critique of what is considered the norm in terms of status (e.g., social hierarchies and social constructs of difference), control (e.g., rules, contracts

and policies), opportunity and fairness (e.g., meritocracy and access, participation and income distribution) (Scanlon, 2018). A more politicised approach to leadership practices is also required (Pullen et al., 2021).

Five specific implications are suggested for leadership practice. The following recommendations are made to advance leadership practices and education that seek to address cultural and gender diversity. Leaders should:

- understand the historical and political context;

- work with and across differences;

- rethink the relationship between leaders and followers;

- adopt an ethical democratic goal; and

- disrupt the status quo.

Such changes can become everyday practices, but require leadership education and development, so that new ways of being, doing and understanding leadership practices are conceptualised and enacted.

Understand the historical and political context

If leadership practices are to work with and across forms of difference, it is critical to understand the historical and political context in which identity, gender, diversity and the struggles for survival and equality are located. This will help overcome the tendency to individualise differences, conceal inequality and neutralise antagonism and struggle (Ahmed & Swan, 2006). For example, while feminists of different ethnic backgrounds in Australia, Brazil and the United States may have an overlapping political project, the different histories cannot be forgotten in that allied political project. Leadership is, thus, about working within difference, while forming political alliances between them. This turn to the politicisation of diversity and its leadership is key to developing more inclusive forms of organising that do not assume that diversity means the same thing to all people in all places.

➔ **Recommendation for leaders**: Take responsibility and be accountable for change as well as advocate, seek advice and/or collaborate with diversity organisations and community groups.

➔ **Recommendation for educators**: Embed in the curriculum content and activities that help future leaders understand work, management and organising as a socio-historically constructed practice. Given the Australian context, become knowledgeable, seek expertise and link to Indigenous history and struggles.

Work with and across differences

Leadership for diversity can benefit from embodying a transversal politics (Yuval-Davis, 1999) based on flexible solidarity across and with difference (Collins, 2017). This is a politics that respects the diversity within diversity, while still supporting common political projects and alliances. This starts with understanding issues of difference through the framework of intersectionality. Challenging dominant one-dimensional perspectives of diversity is required. In so doing, resisting the reactionary desire to overcome one form of oppression by instituting a different one that serves one's own interests is required. The underlying structure of how difference is understood needs to change. A fundamental democratic respect for difference that does not seek to assimilate is needed for a genuine practice of leadership diversity to emerge through the solidarities and struggles between people.

➔ **Recommendations for leaders**: Use staff surveys to allow employees to identify greater forms of difference (e.g., linguistic, age, ability, gender, ethnicity, birthplace) and to map organisations' diversity across hierarchies and roles.

➔ **Recommendations for educators**: Introduce greater complexity to discussions about culture and critique of diversity categories.

Rethink the relationship between leaders and followers

For leadership to be more diverse and enact a relational practice that fosters greater inclusion, participation and influence of a diverse workforce in the organisation's decision-making processes, there is a need to shift the focus of leadership's rules of cooperation away from loyalty to a small 'in-group' and heroism, to equity and reciprocity with all staff across hierarchy and functions.

Developing leadership theory and practice that fully incorporates the possibilities of inclusion and the harsh realities of inequality and oppression requires an approach that not only attends to the complex interactional processes between leaders and other organisational members, but also facilitates ideological shifts beyond entrenched ideas of what it means to be a 'leader'. Examining leadership in the context of a politics of relationality helps rethink the binaries and associated practices surrounding inclusion and exclusion, leader and follower, self and other, structure and agency, and perpetrators and victims. The politics of relationality provides the means to disrupt systemic institutionalised repressive equality regimes that mark and write us in particular ways that are too often beyond our control. It challenges us to see leadership as an encounter between people of difference. This requires an attitude whereby respect and commitment to understanding and seeking advice from the 'other', because we are bound to one another. In essence, this calls for the need to be "aware and understand that the relationship to the other is constitutive of the world and the self" (Topoloski, 2015, p. 206) and, thus, to take responsibility for our actions or how we relate to others.

➔ **Recommendations for leaders**: Be a relational leader who is open and listens deeply to what all staff have to say, demonstrates safety for staff to interact with leaders and supports staff's emotional investment in the organisation.

➔ **Recommendations for educators**: Facilitate student engagement with an understanding of leadership as a relational and collective practice, rather than an individual's psychological trait, that develops and evolves according to the who, what, when and where of any given situation.

Adopt ethical democratic goals

Leadership practices that position diversity as a problem to be solved, to mitigate risks to business outcomes and organisational goals need to be questioned on ethical and political grounds. This questioning ought to be informed by an acceptance that equality is one of the primary goals of democratic politics. As far as leadership for diversity is concerned, this equality cannot and should not be subordinated to other leadership goals. In this way, leadership diversity presents political possibilities to move diversity in organisations forward. To move beyond representational balance, the over-emphasis or reduction of 'diversity' to business case-friendly scenarios, or to a falsely imagined pristine ethical space from which diversity may be practised. They are problematic because they avoid engaging with the challenges presented by the moral case for equality (Noon, 2007). Practically, the primary goal is equality of outcomes across difference.

To summarise, the various grounds for why diversity matters include the business, legal and moral case. According to the business case, diversity matters because it is a resource, a way to add value and provide a competitive advantage for the nation and corporations (c.f., Korn Ferry

Institute Diversity 2.0). However, it is still, paradoxically, understood from a perspective of deficit, where diversity is less than the norm even if it has the potential to stimulate innovation and productivity. This means that diversity needs to be managed for productive outcomes and greater economic or business gains (Janssens & Steyaert, 2003).

In the legal case, diversity matters because discriminating based on various forms of diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, disability) is illegal, either under national or human rights laws. The legal case reminds people of their rights and obligations.

According to the moral case, diversity matters because inequality matters. Further, inequality needs to be redressed as the premise is that everybody is equal (Scanlon, 2018). Further, diversity matters and needs to be actively tackled (e.g., through greater inclusion) because societies are not historically and by design genuinely inclusive and equitable. In this instance, diversity and inclusion are worth investing time and energy into not because it will increase profit, but because it is seen as the right thing to do.

➔ **Recommendations for leaders**: Consider the moral case for diversity and inclusion alongside the business and legal cases.

➔ **Recommendations for educators**: Discuss the moral case for diversity as a core element of the curriculum and not simply as part of a one-off discussion about business ethics.

Disrupt the status quo

Leadership can advance diversity and equality in organisations by incorporating more radical and transversal politics. Such politics challenges the social and political structures that perpetuate various forms of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, classism and intersectionality). This challenge relies on critical alliances negotiated across multiple intellectual, social, geographic and political positions, and enacted through flexible solidarity to foster a collective ethical responsibility and social and organisational change (Pullen et al., 2021). For leaders to redress and disrupt the mechanisms and processes that render some of us insignificant within and across axes of difference, their practices need to extend beyond the relations between two independent people capable of relating in action to each other. Taking responsibility for all actions and creating a shared practice or 'community' is required. This may, however, require external incentives (e.g., certification, legal compliance) as it has emerged that leaders with no experience of discrimination do not see or perceive certain acts as discriminatory.

➔ **Recommendations for leaders**: Question one's own and other leaders' assumptions and consider the full consequences of actions, and the systems that support them, beyond those who seek to profit from them.

➔ **Recommendations for educators**: Introduce a competitive element or reward system to assessment tasks that encourage students to seriously explore the benefits of business models for the greater good.

Diversity and inclusion strategies and practices at work

Developing diversity and inclusion strategies and practices that genuinely and radically foster equality of a diverse workforce at all levels of organisations requires a transformation of organisational systems and cultures. The current approach to diversity and inclusion has reached its limits in advocating for the benefits of an inclusive and diverse workforce. Bringing about change in organisations is challenging even for those that anticipate the business case benefits of diversity interventions. As mentioned above, what makes it especially hard is the often-overlooked socio-political context in which diversity is managed.

These findings have implications for the next steps involved in further building organisations' cultural cohesion around diversity and inclusion and realising the ethics of equity and principles of inclusion. Steps required to further advance diversity and inclusion strategies and practices include:

- defining diversity as a spectrum;
- aligning diversity and inclusion strategies and practices vertically and horizontally; and
- challenging notions of merit.

Define diversity as a spectrum

It is common for diversity to implicitly refer to 'others' according to abstract categories of difference, which always excludes the full range of staff employed in organisations. This implicit understanding of diversity helps shift the onus of responsibility for inclusion towards minority or marginalised groups who are thought to seek inclusion. In that sense, attempts to be inclusive can produce more exclusion laying the burden on those excluded to prove their value in being included, even to the detriment of others (Ahonen et al., 2014; Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014; Priola et al., 2018). For diversity to be accepted as a norm in our society, moving beyond seeing and understanding diversity as difference is required. There is a need to rethink and reframe diversity as part of a normative pluralism based on the intermingling of diverse groups (Delanty, 2009).

To be inclusive, the diversity of all staff requires consideration and responsibility, and all employees should be accountable for diversity, especially those in leadership and managerial roles. Bottom-up as well as top-down diversity interventions that effectively embrace what diversity is and show that it is valued are required.

Understanding diversity and inclusion as a spectrum of representation will help address many aspects of workforce diversity. For example, this will allow a broader focus beyond gender imbalances or racialised silos of work when tackling issues of intersectionality. Moreover, this will help appreciate inclusion as a cultural practice rather than something that needs to be done to 'others'.

➔ **Recommendations for diversity and inclusion strategies**: Replace strategies of inclusion that focus solely on staff identification with categories of difference, with strategies that provide greater opportunities for meaningful involvement and contribution at work that values difference.

➔ **Recommendations for HRM practices**: Conduct regular surveys to capture the range and changes in diversity and how it is understood and valued in organisations.

Align diversity and inclusion strategies and practices vertically and horizontally

diversity and inclusion practices that target the internal workforce and those designed for external community and society-wide engagement need to have congruent goals and reflect the specific concerns of the diversity of its workforce and the communities the organisation serves. They need to be aligned at all levels, across all functions, and in all geographical areas of the organisation regardless of contractual arrangements. For this to happen, it is essential that diversity and inclusion strategies and practices are shaped by and reflect each organisation's specificities, which means paying attention to professional and organisational cultures.

This alignment also means implementing explicit frameworks and clear paths for addressing internal diversity and inclusion issues, including guidelines for escalating issues. Such a framework could also engage with issues of intersectionality. Finally, this alignment requires consideration of the spectrum of diversity represented in organisations' workforce, with a focus

on what diversity groups are present, at what levels and functions, and who is not present, and where.

As a consequence of diversity and inclusion strategies and practices being embedded and embodied at all levels and functions of organisations and being the responsibility of all line management staff, diversity and inclusion practices can be normalised, and diversity categories and hierarchies can be broken down. Furthermore, diversity and inclusion professional silos can be desegregated. The variety of experiences and realities of diverse staff can be made visible, and diversity fatigue and burnout experienced by diversity and inclusion professionals, and the diverse workforce burdened with the impossible task of change, can be overcome.

➜ **Recommendations for diversity and inclusion strategies**: Tailor diversity and inclusion strategies to the organisation's specific employee diversity data and identified needs, expectations and interests.

➜ **Recommendations for HRM practices**: Raise awareness and demonstrate how CSR strategies are related to diversity and inclusion strategies and how they can address internal gaps in representation across roles and hierarchies.

Challenge meritocracy

The opportunities for all staff to access professional development training and mentoring, career pathways to management and valued and stimulating work assignments are compromised by notions of merit. 'Merit' has become widely adopted in the political and organisational spheres as a libertarian ideal of equality. Belief in merit is, however, problematic because "it justifies the status quo, explaining why people belong where they happen to be in the social order. It is a well-established psychological principle that people prefer to believe that the world is just" (Mark, 2019).

Merit is often the hiding place of those who are resistant to diversity and inclusion in practice. Resistance to change and the advancement of certain members of staff seen as diverse does not always manifest itself in the form of active opposition to staff from minority or marginalised groups from being promoted or open racist or sexist practices.

➜ **Recommendations for diversity and inclusion strategies**: Frame diversity and inclusion strategies and practices as actionable, measurable, and evidence-based opportunities and outcomes for both staff and the organisation away from subjective and inconsistent merit-based perceptions of their contribution to the bottom line of the organisation.

➜ **Recommendations for HRM practices**: Replace merit-based assessments for recruitment and promotion with assessments based on capacity and experience relative to opportunities.

Politicise diversity and inclusion practices

The mainstreaming of diversity and inclusion strategies and practices has led to the depoliticising of difference and the neutralising of others (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Kaasila-Pakanen, 2015). This neutralisation shifts attention away from the systemic production of inequality and disadvantage, to lay the risk and responsibility of overcoming disadvantage on those who experience it (Piketty, 2013; Rose, 1996; Stoesz, 2017).

To disrupt systemic institutionalised repressive equality regimes, as recommended above, there is a need for diversity and inclusion practices to be politicised. Only with diversity and inclusion practices centred on an understanding of how inequality is produced through the discursive, relational and performative aspects of equity can the taken-for-granted of what is seen as 'normal' be challenged. This politicisation of diversity and inclusion practices also needs to be grounded in ethical forms of organising that consider the local demographics and Indigenous

past and present context of Australia. Central to this is not simply acting politically, based on socially situated knowledge and understanding of the need to adapt to different places, but also placing relations with others at the heart of ethical considerations and political action (Pullen et al., 2021).

➔ **Recommendations for diversity and inclusion strategies**: Combine raising awareness about differences and celebrating diverse lived experiences with identifying and changing unfair or unequal practices and procedures.

➔ **Recommendations for HRM practices**: Regularly review and/or consult with staff to determine how the recruitment and promotion systems and procedures may benefit some people over others. Consider how to remedy the disadvantage these structures support.

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