Intercultural awareness and sensitivity in an Australian university: a study of professional practice of university staff.

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

at the University of Technology, Sydney

by

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UTS 2005

CERTIFICATE

I certify that this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that this thesis has been written by me and that any help that I have received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature of candidate

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ABSTRACT

As the cultural and language backgrounds of students enrolling in Australian universities continue to diversify, education, always an act of communication, becomes increasingly an act of *intercultural* communication. Teaching strategies developed for an homogenous culture need to be revised to include these multicultural dimensions. Although there is significant literature concerning theories and training programs in intercultural communication competence that may benefit Australian university staff, training programs to help staff become more competent at addressing the complex communication issues that arise in intercultural contexts are not commonly available for staff at Australian universities. Assuming that university staff who conscientiously seek to improve their teaching effectiveness would welcome and benefit from continuing professional education in intercultural communication, an educational intervention in the form of a Staff Development Training Program in intercultural awareness and sensitivity was designed and implemented for teaching staff at a metropolitan case study campus in Australia. This thesis examines the development and delivery of this intercultural training program to identify the elements that participants found helpful in increasing their intercultural communication skills and also to advance pedagogy in the field of cultural awareness and sensitivity training.

The Training Program was framed as part of processes of both action research and action learning and was comprised of three Workshops offered over a nine-month

period. Over the course of this intercultural Training Program, teachers were provided with a selection of intercultural communication theories relevant to their teaching context and had opportunity to apply these theories to their own professional experiences and practices.

The aim of the research associated with this Training Program was firstly, to investigate and facilitate intercultural awareness and sensitivity in academic practice in the Australian university context, and secondly to identify interculturally aware and sensitive teaching strategies for dissemination to the campus teaching staff and, through publication of this thesis, to other institutions delivering higher education in culturally diverse contexts.

The eleven teachers who attended the workshops also agreed to be research participants. An interpretive methodology was designed in order to investigate the teachers' awareness of and sensitivity to the values, beliefs and practices of international students in the context of their face to face teaching and learning activities. Hence, in-depth interviews were conducted with workshop participants after each workshop to explore seven main Research Questions. The researcher also contributed evidence as a participant-observer and an e-communication list facilitating the sharing of ideas and materials relevant to the training topic was a further source of evidence.

Findings from these multiple sources of evidence demonstrated that purpose-designed intercultural training programs can build the intercultural sensitivity and awareness of Australian university teachers thus enhancing professional practice in culturally diverse teaching contexts. There was a significant contribution to contemporary

knowledge of the specific nature of intercultural teaching and learning problems for international students engaging with Australian curriculum and pedagogy. In addition, possible strategies were contributed to assist university teachers to have more confidence and less anxiety concerning their professional practice with culturally diverse students. In particular, strategies were suggested to help teachers to address aspects of professional practice related to learning issues associated with international students such as, teacher-dependence, uncritical thinking and second language expression. Recommendations were made concerning changes to organisational policy on staff development programs and support structures for international students and their teachers in Australian universities. Specifically, Australian universities should develop ongoing and regular intercultural training opportunities for their staff beginning with induction. Intercultural training for teachers should include an examination of culturally different learning styles and preferences. Australian universities need to establish Learning Support and Counselling Units for international students. In addition, Australian universities should promote and support the learning of languages other than English amongst their staff.

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