
The Effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Training in the Australian Context

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This report was prepared for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs on behalf of the Joint Commonwealth, State and Territory Research Advisory Committee

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Executive Summary

A 15-month national research study of the effectiveness of cross-cultural training (CCT) in the Australian public and community sectors has produced statistically significant evidence that CCT is of direct benefit to employees, their organisations and their clients. The study, which involved a review of the literature, consultations with 195 stakeholders and five surveys involving 718 managers, trainers and participants, has also identified policy, planning and performance issues regarding the future provision of CCT.

Project Objectives

- To identify and document the nature, extent, status, best practice approaches and effectiveness of cross-cultural training as a strategy for achieving multicultural policy objectives.
- To establish credible data to guide the future policy development and current management decisions of agencies responsible for multicultural affairs, government agencies and community organisations working to implement the *Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society*, and cross-cultural trainers, in relation to the justification of the utilisation of resources for cross-cultural training.
- To provide guidelines on the implementation of effective cross-cultural training and the development needs of the cross-cultural training field.

Key Findings

- Cross-Cultural Training (CCT) is an important element in the development of individual and organisational cultural competence, which underpins the social cohesion and social capital of Australian society.
- A survey of public sector current practice over the period 2000-2005 produced consistent qualitative evidence that CCT programs were effective in achieving their objectives, although the level of training activity was low compared to estimated levels of demand and recommendations for increased training.
- The majority of public sector and community organisations surveyed expected increased or greatly increased demand for CCT over the next five years, with improving customer service the main driver for this demand.
- Comparisons of pre-training, immediate post training and longitudinal training evaluation surveys involving 515 public sector employees showed statistically significant improvements in their awareness of cultural influences on customer and workplace interactions, knowledge and understanding of other cultures and understanding of organisational cultural diversity policies and issues.
- Due to the brevity of the 39 CCT programs evaluated (averaging six hours) and the general absence of organisational measurements of cultural competence, the training did not result in gains in other areas such as understanding the deeper effects of one's own culture on oneself and in confidence to transfer cross cultural skills to the workplace and to colleagues.
- Over 60% of participants would like more cross-cultural training, indicating their acknowledgement that the development of cultural competence is a complex and on-going learning process.
- CCT training was rated highly by the great majority of participants, 88% recommending that it be compulsory for all staff in customer contact positions.
- The demonstrated fact that even short training programs result in benefits and stimulate interest in further learning indicates that investments in more robust and job-focused CCT will be likely to deliver greater measurable returns for organisations.

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- Although the majority of managers surveyed recognised the importance of cultural competence to service quality and workforce relations, few organisations conducted CCT programs on a regular basis or included cultural competence in performance appraisals.
 - The future development of cultural competence at all levels of organisations and systems will require its inclusion in formal competency standards and organisational development strategies.
 - Cross-cultural trainers identified needs for professional development, for further research and for the development of Australian training resources.

The Australian Context of Cross-Cultural Training

Cross-cultural training must be evaluated in the broader context of Australian social and economic trends and needs in relation to social cohesion, governance, immigration, workforce development, globalisation and economic competitiveness.

Social cohesion and the development of human capital rely to a large degree on a society's social capital, described as the networks and norms of reciprocity and trust that enhance productivity (McGaw, 2006). Underpinning social capital and social cohesion is cultural competence, which can be broadly described as the ability of systems, organisations, professions and individuals to work effectively in culturally diverse environments and situations. Cross-cultural training, which aims to develop the awareness, knowledge and skills needed to interact appropriately and effectively with culturally diverse customers and co-workers, is an important element in the development of cultural competence.

Cultural competence is critical to the achievement of national multicultural policy objectives and to the success of the immigration and settlement process. As Australia comes to rely increasingly on its ability to attract and retain skilled migrants from diverse cultural backgrounds, the ability to demonstrate social cohesion and inclusion will enhance the nation's competitiveness with other nations experiencing skills shortages. Cultural competence is vital to international trade performance and the fulfilment of international diplomacy and security responsibilities. The recognition and leveraging of workforce cultural diversity can also constitute a sustainable competitive advantage for enterprises in every industry. Awareness of these drivers is evident in the organisations involved in this study.

Consultations with and information received from 195 representatives of public and community sector organisations and CCT training providers across Australia identified a growing need for cultural competence, driven mainly by customer expectations and policy and compliance requirements. However, while respondents reported that there was ample anecdotal evidence of the benefits of CCT to individuals and organisations, wider use of CCT was hindered by a perceived lack of consistency in CCT approaches and aims and the absence of clear measures of cultural competence and practical guidelines for implementing programs. The position of CCT in training and development frameworks and strategies is not clear and cultural competence is not yet recognised as a generic skill in most industries.

Two on-line surveys of current practice and training providers received 203 responses, a response rate of 34% of the 595 Commonwealth, state, local government, community and training provider organisations that were invited to participate. The data from these surveys, summarised below and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, are presented in full in Appendices A and B.

Survey of Current Cross-Cultural Training Practice in the Australian Public Sector

Responses to the current practice survey were received from 105 representatives from 93 government and community organisations. The findings of this survey revealed a generally modest level of CCT activity. The 93 responding organisations conducted an average of five training events per year averaging 5.2 hours duration, mainly for staff level employees. The types of training conducted were general cultural awareness, programs on specific cultures, working with interpreters, specialised programs for fields such as health and policing, and managing culturally diverse workforces. The main training objectives were to improve customer service, workplace communication, community relations, compliance with laws and policies, marketing of services and international business skills.

Over 83% of survey respondents rated CCT effective to extremely effective in meeting these objectives, based on participant feedback, workplace assessment and feedback from external stakeholders. Participant satisfaction with CCT programs was rated as high or very high by 63% of respondents.

The degree of importance that managers placed on cultural competence in dealing with culturally diverse customers and co-workers was rated at 3.65 on a 5-point scale and the degree of management support for CCT was rated at 3.59. However, while 87.6% of respondents stated that employee cultural competence was important or very important to managers, only 55.6% rated management support for CCT as strong or very strong. CCT was mainly offered on a voluntary basis and only 13.8% of respondents reported that cultural competence was always or usually included in performance appraisals.

Commenting on the future of CCT in their organisations, 73.9% of respondents expected increased or greatly increased demand for general CCT over the next five years, driven mainly by increasing customer service requirements and expectations and workforce factors including staff demand for training, labour market forces and diversity initiatives. The majority predicted initiatives to develop and implement policies for culturally inclusive work practices and to include cultural competence in other training programs.

Survey of Cross-Cultural Training Providers and Trainers

There were 98 responses to this survey, representing 76 organisations and individual CCT trainers. Their main areas of training expertise were in general cultural awareness, specialised CCT and diversity management. Two thirds of their training provision was to government and community organisations and one third to the private sector.

The training providers' responses concerning current practice in their client organisations, including types and aims of training and the levels of management support for CCT were very similar to the organisational responses summarised above.

The main challenges facing training providers were in dealing with socio-political issues surrounding diversity, demonstrating the value of CCT to stakeholders and resolving training methodology issues. Ensuring the future development of the CCT field presented further challenges, including the development of accreditation standards, establishment of professional development programs and the production of training resources tailored to the Australian multicultural context.

The profile of CCT trainers showed that 90% were Australian citizens, 77% were female and 68% spoke two languages. Their average age was 48, a significant factor in terms of the experiential background of trainers and the capacity of the field to meet increased future demand. CCT was not the sole activity of most trainers, who conducted an average of 20 workshops a year. Many were also involved in research, development and other forms of education and training. Their responses to questions regarding their motivation displayed a high level of passion, commitment and engagement, reflecting the common observation in the literature that enthusiastic and committed facilitators are essential to effective CCT.

While 76% have had specific training in their areas of expertise, many professional development needs were identified including training in the psychology of cross-cultural effectiveness and about specific cultures and the development of training resources for the Australian context. Topics for further research included cultural competence in teams and leadership, cultural diversity in the contexts of power and policy and models for understanding culture and identity in the Australian social and economic contexts.

Surveys of the Effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Training

The objective of cross-cultural training is to develop awareness of the cultural dimensions of interactions and effectiveness in situations and environments characterised by cultural diversity. To evaluate the effectiveness of CCT programs over time in Australian public sector organisations, a pre-training survey, an immediate post-training survey and a longitudinal training evaluation survey were conducted over an 11-month period from July 2005 to June 2006. The first two surveys were completed by 515 training participants in 39 groups from 31 government and community organisations. Of these, 145 participants responded to the longitudinal survey, giving a 28% response rate.

The participants attended five types of CCT programs, focused on general cultural awareness (51%), specialised training (22%), working with cultural diversity (16.2%), working with interpreters (7.4%) and train-the-trainer (3.5%). The average duration of programs was 6.1 hours, with 92% conducted over periods of one day to one hour.

The immediate post-training evaluation ratings in 2005 showed increases on all of the areas of knowledge and awareness against which participants self-rated themselves in the pre-survey. The highest percentage point increases were in the areas of understanding of organisational policies and issues (21%), knowledge of cross-cultural skills (26%) and understanding of other cultures (25%). There were smaller improvements in understanding of the effects of one's own culture on oneself, awareness of the effects of cultural differences on interactions and confidence in dealing with people from different cultures. Ratings of program design, trainer effectiveness, trainer knowledge, interactivity and overall satisfaction were all above 4 on a 5-point scale.

The contribution of the training program to participants' job effectiveness received an average rating of 3.8 on a 5-point scale. Participants reported potential benefits to their organisation through increased knowledge of and improved service to culturally diverse customers and transfer of their learning to co-workers. Participants' level of interest in applying learning to work was rated at 4.5. Seven out of ten participants rated their confidence in their ability to transfer learning to colleagues as above average or higher.

Comparisons of the responses to 2005 pre-training and the 2006 longitudinal questions showed statistically significant (95% confidence level) increased percentage changes in three areas:

- understanding of organisational policies and issues regarding cultural diversity
(12.3% increase on 2005 ratings)
- knowledge of cross-cultural communication skills
(17.1% increase on 2005 ratings)
- knowledge and understanding of the customs, values and beliefs of diverse cultures
(16.7% increase on 2005 ratings)

There were smaller, statistically insignificant, increases in awareness of the influence of one's own culture on oneself and the degree to which cultural differences affected interactions. The lack of significant gains in these deeper areas of cultural competence can be seen as further indication of the limits of short, introductory CCT programs.

Participants' perceived importance of cultural competence to their work performance and their confidence to work with different cultures showed no significant change from the previous surveys.

The average decrease of 20.2 percentage points between participants' relatively high immediate post-training expectations of the training's contribution to performance and their actual experiences of transferring their learning to the workplace points to the need for organisations to ensure the application of learning to performance.

CCT positively affected participants' views of cultural diversity and stimulated interest, with 61% indicating they would like further training and 41% recommending longer programs. Reported benefits to the organisation included improved customer service and greater awareness of customer needs and increased use of support services. Reflecting the perceived value and relevance of the training, 87.7% of participants recommended that CCT be compulsory for all staff in customer service positions.

The training evaluation survey results demonstrate the benefits of CCT. However, the basic level and short duration of the majority of the CCT programs evaluated limited the effectiveness of the training in developing the skills required to achieve individual cultural competence and apply it to the workplace. The effectiveness of CCT in contributing to organisational cultural competence may also be limited by the ability of organisations to adopt new perspectives on cultural diversity and an absence of competency standards and performance indicators that factor recognition of cultural diversity into processes and procedures.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of cross-cultural training in contributing to the cultural competence of the Australian public sector context depends on a number of related elements.

At the systemic and organisational levels, cultural competence must be closely linked to policy requirements and organisational values and service delivery objectives and expressed in high levels of political, leadership and managerial support for CCT.

At the professional level, cultural competence must be integrated into the standards and competency and performance frameworks of professions and occupations.

At the individual level, CCT is most effective when it addresses the concerns and motivations of participants and is provided within an organisational context that provides opportunities and incentives for applying acquired cross-cultural knowledge and skills to the workplace.

To effectively facilitate the development of cultural competence, cross-cultural trainers need support in the areas of professional and resource development.

Cross-cultural training is an effective strategy in the achievement of organisational performance targets and multicultural policy objectives. Addressing the identified limitations of current practice in CCT will increase its contribution to the development and enhancement of organisational and individual cultural competence.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Develop Cultural Competence Management Frameworks, Guidelines and Resources

Commonwealth, state and local governments should develop and promote planning frameworks, implementation guidelines and supporting management training resources. This will enable systems and organisations to incorporate cross-cultural training into organisational development, compliance and market relations strategies, specifying relevant aspects of professional and organisational cultural competency to be included in reporting requirements as an integral part of performance appraisal of agency heads and senior executives.

Recommendation 2: Develop a Cultural Competence Assessment Framework

Commonwealth, state and local governments and community service organisations should develop frameworks identifying the criteria for assessing the cultural competence requirements of job specifications at all levels for use in recruitment, professional development, performance appraisal and career development.

Recommendation 3: Promote Training Programs and Resources for Managing Cultural Diversity and Cross-Cultural Communication

Commonwealth, state and local governments, education institutions and community service organisations should more widely promote their existing cultural competence training programs and resources to encourage and assist other public and community sector organisations to assess and further develop their cultural competence.

Recommendation 4: Provide Cross-Cultural Training Advice and Support

All levels of government, and multicultural agencies in particular, should establish and promote points of contact to provide information and advice on cross-cultural training to all interested organisations, to promote best practice and to encourage and support the development of cultural competence in the workforce.

Recommendation 5: Develop Registers of Cross-Cultural Training Providers

The appropriate agencies at all levels of government should develop nationally-consistent registers or panels of qualified cross-cultural training providers which are accessible to all levels of government and the private sector and which include links to registers in other jurisdictions. The design of the registers should be based on existing training and consulting procurement processes and be informed by work being done in South Australia and Queensland regarding providers of cross-cultural training.

Recommendation 6: Establish a National Cross-Cultural Trainers Professional Association

Australian cross-cultural trainers should establish a national association of practitioners in cross-cultural training, consulting, research and development, either as a separate entity or within or in affiliation with existing national and/or international professional bodies.

Recommendation 7: Support the Professional Development of Cross-Cultural Trainers

Relevant commonwealth and state education authorities should work with the cross-cultural training field to investigate the possibility of establishing professional development pathways and programs for cross-cultural trainers, including formal tertiary qualifications and continuing professional education, to meet the needs of existing trainers and to attract and develop new trainers to the field.

Recommendation 8: Conduct Further Cultural Competence Research

All jurisdictions should identify and commission further research into relevant aspects of cultural competence development including:

- the overall scope and effectiveness of CCT within the jurisdiction
- the relative effectiveness of different CCT training types, approaches and configurations in contributing to improved cultural competence in job performance in specific sectors industries and professions
- the degree to which occupational or industry systems and practices impede or foster the development and application of cultural competence in the workplace, and
- the extent to which cultural competence learning is integrated into learning pathways in the schools, VET and higher education sectors and applicable to employment and career development.

Action Guide for Implementing Cross-Cultural Training Programs

The following steps, based on the research findings and content of this report, outline the process of planning, developing and conducting a cross-cultural training program.

Step 1: Define the Organisational Context and Training Objectives

Establish the relationship of cultural competence to the organisational, legal and people management contexts. Define the training needs and objectives.

Ensure strong organisational support for the training program.

See Chapter 4: Survey of Cross-Cultural Training Practice in the Australian Public Sector

See Chapter 7: Guidelines for Implementing Cross-Cultural Training Programs

Step 2: Understand Cultural Competence and Cross-Cultural Training

Before embarking on a CCT program, be clear on the nature of cultural competence, the range of CCT approaches and the criteria for an effective CCT trainer.

See Chapter 3: Cultural Competence and the Role of Cross-Cultural Training

Step 3: Promote the Value of Cross-Cultural Training to the Organisation

Demonstrate the value of CCT to all stakeholders with the statistical evidence and qualitative comments from this research study.

See Chapter 6: Evaluation of CCT in the Australian Public Sector

Step 4: Design and Conduct Cross-Cultural Training Effectively

Study the range of options for CCT and resources that will ensure the training objectives are met. Select the appropriate trainers and work closely with them. Organise and conduct the program for maximum effectiveness.

See Chapter 7: Guidelines for Implementing Cross-Cultural Training Programs

See Chapter 3: Section 3.4 What is a competent cross-cultural trainer?

Step 5: Evaluate and Follow-up the Cross-Cultural Training Program

Design and carry out a rigorous evaluation process. Identify and implement strategies to ensure that learning is applied to performance and enhancing the organisation's cultural competence.

See Chapter 3: Cultural Competence and the Role of Cross-Cultural Training

See Chapter 7: Guidelines for Implementing Cross-Cultural Training Programs

