Australia Measures the Value of Cross Cultural Training
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An Australian longitudinal research study has produced statistical evidence that cross-cultural training (CCT) directly benefits public sector employees, their organizations and clients. Commissioned by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, the 15-month, nationwide study involved a review of the literature, consultations with 195 stakeholders and five surveys involving 718 managers, trainers and participants.

With the main aim of determining the justification for allocating resources to CCT, the study investigated current CCT practice in Australian government and community organizations, the effectiveness of CCT programs and the broader context in which cross-cultural training should be evaluated. It identified policy, planning, training delivery and performance issues regarding the future development of cultural competence.

The Australian Context of Cross-Cultural Training

In the literature review and in consultations with 195 representatives (of public and community sector organizations) and training providers across Australia, cross-cultural training was considered within the broader context of Australian social and economic trends, with a particular focus on social inclusion and cohesion.

Societies increasingly recognize the importance of social capital to the development of human capital. Social capital — described as the networks and norms of reciprocity and trust that enhance productivity — takes two forms; bonding and bridging. Bonding is the form of social capital established among relatively homogeneous groups. Bridging is the form of social capital established between heterogeneous groups. This form of social capital is of particular significance to social cohesion in a multicultural society and its workplaces.

Underpinning social capital and social cohesion is cultural competence (also called cross-cultural or intercultural competence), which can be described as the ability of systems, organizations, professions and individuals to work effectively in culturally diverse environments and situations.

For decades, cross-cultural training and skills have been largely perceived as separate, specialized areas of development. However, in the context of social cohesion, cross-cultural
training needs to be seen as an important element in the development of cultural competence as a generic capability.

Cultural competence is critical to the achievement of national multicultural policy objectives and 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 to varying degrees in the organizations involved in this study.

The consultations identified a growing need for cultural competence, driven mainly by customer expectations, and policy and compliance requirements. However, while respondents reported ample anecdotal evidence of the benefits of CCT to individuals and organizations, wider use of CCT was hindered by a perceived lack of consistency in its approaches and aims. There was also 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 recognized as a generic skill in most industries.

Study Outcomes and Cross-Cultural Training Practices in Australia

The 2005 survey of current practice involving 105 management-level respondents from 93 government and community organizations revealed a generally modest level of CCT activity over the previous five years. The organizations conducted an average of five 5-hour workshops per year, mainly for staff-level employees. The types of training included general cultural awareness, culture-specific training, working with interpreters, specialized 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.

CCT was rated effective or highly effective in achieving training objectives by 83 percent of respondents. But while 88 percent rated staff cultural competence as very important for service quality and workforce relations, only 56 percent rated management support for CCT as strong or very strong. Support was strongest among front-line managers, reinforcing the observation that the closer to cultural diversity employees are, the greater their demand and support for CCT.

Interestingly, training participants responding to the evaluation surveys (see following section) rated the importance that managers placed on cultural competence 14 percent higher than did the current practice survey respondents. Participants also rated the level of support for CCT among managers 11 percent higher than the managers did.

Although the majority of managers surveyed recognized the importance of cultural competence to service quality and workforce relations, only 47 percent reported that their organizations conducted CCT programs on a regular basis. Less than 14 percent reported that cultural competence was usually or always included in performance appraisals.
The disparity between participants' highly positive views of CCT and their managers' more modest level of support for it indicates a need for organizations to adopt new perspectives that integrate cultural diversity and cultural competence into strategic management and organizational development.

Such a trend appears to be emerging, with 74 percent of respondents expecting increased or greatly increased demand for CCT over the next five years in response to the need to improve customer service and workplace relations. The majority predicted initiatives within their organizations to develop and implement policies for culturally inclusive work practices and to include cultural competence in other training programs.

Involvement in the current practice survey caused several respondents to seriously reflect on their actual efforts to develop cultural competence and social cohesion in their organizations. Several respondents reported that their organization had "done" cross-cultural training several years ago, thus "ticking the box," and thereafter ignoring it, despite continuing need and factors such as staff turnover. Representatives of organizations that declined to participate in the research because they had not conducted any CCT in the preceding five years regularly commented on their concern with this state of affairs.

The Effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Training

In 2005, 515 participants in 39 CCT workshops averaging 6.1 hours duration completed pre-training and immediate post-training evaluations. The organizations surveyed included health services, local government, police, university staff, immigration, migrant services, housing services, aged care, export services, child and family services and transport.

The immediate post-training evaluation ratings showed statistically significant increases on all pre-survey self-assessments in the understanding of organizational policies and issues, knowledge of cross-cultural skills and understanding of other cultures. There were smaller, statistically insignificant 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. Average ratings of program design, trainer effectiveness, trainer knowledge and interactivity were all above 4 on a 5-point scale, with 85 percent of participants reporting above average to high levels of satisfaction with the training.

The participants rated the potential contribution of training to their job effectiveness at 3.8 on a 1-5 scale. They identified potential benefits to their organization through increased knowledge of and improved service to culturally diverse customers and transfer of their learning to coworkers. Their level of interest in applying learning to work was rated at 4.5 and 71 percent of participants rated their confidence in their ability to transfer learning to colleagues as above average or higher.

In 2006, 145 of the participants responded to a longitudinal training evaluation survey three to ten months after completing their training. Comparisons of the responses to 2005 pre-training and the 2006 longitudinal questions showed statistically significant (95 percent confidence level) increases in three areas:

- understanding of organizational policies and issues regarding cultural diversity
There was no statistically significant evidence of increases or decreases in awareness of the influence of one's own culture on oneself or of the effects of cultural differences on personal interactions. Participants' confidence to work with different cultures showed no significant change nor did the perceived importance of cultural competence to work performance.

Among the strongest indicators of the perceived value of cross-cultural training (CCT) were the following findings:

- 82 percent rated the importance of cultural competence to their jobs as above average or high.
- 61 percent would like more cross-cultural training.
- 73 percent said CCT should be compulsory for everyone in their organization.
- 88 percent said CCT should be compulsory for all staff in customer contact positions.

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Initial reactions to these findings included expressions of surprise that such short programs could result in such long-term gains. Effective CCT provides opportunities for participants to reflect on and discuss a lifetime of experiences. It elucidates and provides a conceptual framework for understanding these experiences, leading to new perspectives and attitudes, which for many participants are sustained long after the training event.

While most participants remained satisfied with the training experience over time, there was a reduction of 10.9 percentage points in the number reporting above average or high levels of satisfaction. This reduced rating reflects other findings that for many participants the training was not long enough, did not go into sufficient depth, did not address expected issues or was not subsequently transferable to the workplace. It may also be a result of participants' increased knowledge and awareness leading them to recognize the depth and complexity of the subject and the limitations of short, basic training programs.

The basic level and brevity of the training also limited its effectiveness in increasing participants' confidence in dealing with cultural diversity and in applying knowledge to the workplace or transferring it to coworkers. In the 2005 surveys, participants' interest in applying their learning to their jobs was rated at 4.5 on a 5-point Likert scale. In 2006, the extent to which participants had actually been able to apply their learning was rated at 3.4, a percentage change of -23.8 percent compared with the 2005 rating. While this disparity reflects the common experience of trainees in many subjects returning with new ideas to an unchanged workplace, some of the survey findings identified organizational factors as limiting the return on training investment.

A key message is that the effectiveness of CCT in contributing to organizational cultural competence appears to be limited as much by the inability of organizations to support it as by the brevity and basic level of the training itself. Developing organization-specific competency standards and performance indicators that factor recognition of cultural diversity into processes and procedures would improve the design and delivery of CCT and the return on the training investment.
The Cross-Cultural Training Field
A survey of 98 CCT providers and trainers corroborated and reinforced the key messages of the current practice survey and identified the following main challenges facing the CCT field:

- dealing with socio-political issues surrounding cultural diversity in Australian communities and workplaces,
- demonstrating the value of CCT to stakeholders, and
- resolving training methodology issues.

Several respondents questioned the use of the terms "trainer" and "training" to describe what is essentially an educative process, preferring "facilitator" or "consultant" and emphasizing the importance of gaining awareness of one's own cultural identity before acquiring knowledge of other cultures.

The future development of the CCT field presented challenges, including the development of accreditation standards, establishment of professional development programs and the production of training resources tailored to the Australian multicultural context.

Trainers were predominantly women (77 percent) and bilingual (68 percent). 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 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. Only seven percent were younger than 35.

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 percent have had specific training in their areas of expertise, there was strong support for professional development in cross-cultural training methodologies, culture-specific programs and the development of training resources for the Australian context. Research was also recommended on 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.

The Future: Developing Cultural Competence in Organizations
The effectiveness of future cross-cultural training in contributing to the cultural competence of the Australian public sector depends on a number of related elements. At the systemic and organizational levels, cultural competence must be closely linked to strategic planning, policy requirements, organizational values and service delivery objectives. Support for CCT must be expressed at the highest political, leadership and managerial levels.

At the professional level, cultural competence must be integrated into the standards and competency and performance frameworks of professions and occupations. This implies the inclusion of cross-cultural education and training in undergraduate and continuing professional education.
At the individual level, CCT is most effective when it addresses participants' concerns and motivations and is provided within an organizational context that provides opportunities, incentives and support for applying cross-cultural knowledge and skills in the workplace.

In the field of cross-cultural awareness development it is often difficult to quantify the return on training investment to a degree that convinces purse-string holders that the allocation of resources for CCT is justifiable. The old rejoinder about the relative costs of training versus ignorance is amply illustrated in intercultural aspects of business, diplomacy and society at large. However, it is hard to measure the monetary value of cultural understanding and awareness. For example, many participants report that as a result of their training they feel "more relaxed when dealing with clients from different cultures." Organization leaders have to ask, "What is the long term value to the organization of reduced stress for employees, happier clients and more effective services?"

Addressing the identified methodological and organizational limitations of current practice in CCT will increase its contribution to the development and enhancement of cultural competence at every level. To do this, the report recommends developing management and assessment frameworks and resources to enable organizations to incorporate CCT into organizational development, compliance and market relations strategies. It also recommends support for the professional development of trainers, including formal tertiary qualifications and continuing professional education and the creation of a national professional association.

Further research is recommended into training approaches and learning pathways for developing cultural competence in individuals and organizations. A new research project, recommended in the report, is currently investigating the contribution of CCT received in vocational training to graduates' workplace performance (see below for details).

In conclusion, the research demonstrates that even short cross-cultural training programs result in benefits and stimulate interest in further learning. Addressing the identified limitations of current training practice and following the recommendations for further development of the field will result in even greater measurable benefits for organizations and the communities they serve.

The full report of "The Effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Training in the Australian Context" is available on the Department of Immigration and Citizenship website; http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/research/index.htm

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The contribution of cross-cultural training to VET graduates' job performance

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research is surveying Australian training organizations that provide cross-cultural training as part of certificate or diploma courses, graduates of these programs and their employers to determine the effectiveness and workplace benefits of such training. Readers interested in learning more about the project or contributing to the literature review are invited to contact the project manager, Robert Bean at: 61 8 8598-3088 or Email: rsbean@bigpond.com

Endnotes
2. “Cross-cultural training” (CCT) is defined as any training and education program that aims to increase "cultural competence," comprising the awareness, knowledge and skills to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity.
3. See my article in the Winter 2006 issue of The Diversity Factor.