



**ethnic
communities'
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victoria**

Cultural Competence GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOLS

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Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc.
Statewide Resources Centre
150 Palmerston Street, Carlton VIC 3053
T 03 9349 4122 F 03 9349 4967



Cultural Competence

GUIDELINES AND PROTOCOLS

The Australian Context

This document provides information and guidelines on cultural competence for anyone seeking to foster constructive interactions between members of different cultures. The combination of Indigenous populations and history of immigration in Australia have meant that multiculturalism and cultural diversity are an integral component of Australian society. In 2001, the Australian census showed that Australian people speak over 200 languages, including the more than 60 languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (*ABS 2001*). In the same year 16% of the total Australian population, some 2.8 million people, were found to speak a language other than English at home (*ABS 2001*). By 2004, the number of overseas born Australians stood at 4.5 million people, a figure representing almost one quarter (24%) of the Australian population (*ABS 2004*).

In a country with high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity it is not surprising that there are many applications for cultural competence. Cultural competence is extremely important for any individual or organisation wishing to operate professionally and effectively in a multicultural context.

Considering Culture

Culture can be described as the interplay of many elements which including behaviours, customs, beliefs, values and institutions (Mays, Siantz and Viehweg 2002). Culture is sometimes described as a lens through which we view the world, meaning that ones culture influences their perceptions and interactions in everyday life. A few of the dimensions of difference between cultures are apparent when considering different ways of understanding time, hierarchy, health, collectivism and individualism. Importantly though, while culture influences human interactions it must be viewed as dynamic rather than static. That is to say, culture changes over time and members of a particular culture or ethnicity will not always think and act in ways which are consistent with their cultural background.

The diversity of individuals or groups may be influenced by the following:

- Cultural Identity
- Ethnic Identity
- Nationality
- Acculturation
- Assimilation
- Class
- Education
- Language
- Literacy
- Family configuration
- Social history
- Perception of time
- Gender
- Sexuality
- Religion and spiritual views
- Political orientation

(National Centre for Cultural Competence 2006)



Defining Cultural Competence

Cultural competence aims to foster constructive interactions between members of different cultures. Other terms for cultural competence which have slightly different meanings include 'cultural responsiveness', 'cultural awareness' and 'cultural sensitivity'. This guide uses the language of 'cultural competence' so as to be consistent with trends within Australian and international contexts (*NHMRC 2005*).

The following definitions of cultural competence are widely cited and serve as useful reference points:

"Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross cultural situations" (*Cross et al. 1989, cited in NCCC 2006*).

"Cultural competence requires that organisations have clearly defined, congruent set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, structures and practices that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally" (*NCCC 2006*).

Cultural competence is best viewed as an ongoing process and an ideal to strive towards (Diller 2004). Rather than simply complying with legislation, meeting minimum standards of practice, or having a fixed end point, cultural competence is a process which continually evolves.

Essential Elements of Cultural Competence

The National Centre for Cultural Competence (NCCC) has identified five key components of cultural competence¹ as seen in the text box below.

1. A valuing of cultural diversity

This stage involves integrating respect for diversity into programs, policies and services and also recognising that members of certain cultural groups may have cultural as well as individual needs.

2. Conducting a cultural self-assessment

Organisations develop an awareness of their own cultures and communities, assumptions, and biases and identify actions to reduce such barriers.

3. Managing the dynamics of difference

At this stage the dynamics of cultural difference are proactively managed, improving the interactions between different cultures.

4. Acquiring and institutionalising cultural knowledge

As all organisations inevitably encounter cultural diversity, a need exists to integrate an understanding of different cultures into service delivery and practices.

5. Adapting to diversity and cultural contexts

At this stage cultural knowledge is embedded throughout the hierarchy of the organisation and policy, practices, service delivery and behaviours are adapted to fit the cultural diversity of the community engaged.

(Source: National Centre for Cultural Competence 2006)

¹ Based on the work of Cross et al 1989. See reference list for details.



Cultural Competence at the Organisational level

A culturally competent organisation ensures that a commitment to cultural competency can be seen throughout all levels of the hierarchy. As a result, cultural competency will be reflected in any given organisation's:

- Philosophy
- Mission statement
- Policy, structures, procedures, practices
- Diverse, knowledgeable and skilled workforce
- Dedicated resources and incentives
- Community engagement and partnerships
- Information published and disseminated; and
- Advocacy

(NCCC 2006)

Cultural Competence at the Individual Level

For the individual the process of cultural competence involves becoming culturally aware, gaining cultural knowledge and achieving cultural skills (*Mays, Siantz & Viehweg 2002*).

Importantly, on the individual level cultural competence requires more than practicing tolerance. It can be defined as:

“The ability to identify and challenge one's own cultural assumptions, one's values and beliefs. It is about developing empathy and connected knowledge, the ability to see the world through another's eyes, or at the very least, to recognise that others may view the world through different cultural lenses”
(Fitzgerald 2000 cited in Stewart 2006)

The movement towards cultural competency involves the diminishing of ethnocentric attitudes, more open behaviours, greater flexibility and non-judgmental perceptions (*AOTA Inc. 2000*).

Drawing from the work of AOTO Inc, a culturally competent individual is likely to possess:

- A strong knowledge of how one's own culture shapes attitudes, perceptions and behaviours
- A valuing of diversity and willingness to learn about other peoples cultures
- Specific knowledge of the language, customs and values of particular cultures
- The skills to feel comfortable and communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds
- An awareness of the limited value of stereotyping individuals from certain cultures or ethnicities
(*AOTO Inc. 2000*)



Practical Examples of Cultural Competence

- 'Diversity champions' from senior levels of management advocate and implement cultural competence policies and procedures throughout an organisation (*Stewart 2006*).
- A health care provider distributes a discussion paper on diversity which outlines practical ways of supporting health services to be culturally appropriate (*NHMRC 2005*).
- A health care provider works closely with ethno-specific and multicultural agencies to develop and implement research and programs for community wellbeing (*NHMRC 2005*).
- Cross cultural and ethno-specific training is offered to all new employees within an organisation as part of the induction program (*NHMRC 2005*).
- The different cultural perceptions of leisure, status, social and gender roles are considered when devising and implementing health promotion activities. For example, Women only sessions are initiated at a local swimming pool to encourage Muslim women to participate in a 'Learn to Swim' program (*NHMRC 2005*).
- On learning about a service through information in her own language, a refugee woman approaches a counter seeking assistance with a health problem and receives assistance by a person who speaks her language and understands her (*Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society 1998*).
- An employment agency ensures that its work plan, budget and planning guarantee that there are resources available to clients who require assistance with applications, language or training (*Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society 1998*).

References and Further Resources

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Appendix One

Ten Key Questions for Organisations Striving for Cultural Competence

- 1. Is cultural competence embedded in the philosophy, mission statement, policies and key objectives of the organisation?
- 2. Are culturally and linguistically diverse staff employed throughout the hierarchy of your organisation?
- 3. Have you ensured that all staff receive comprehensive training for cultural competence on commencing employment?
- 4. Are resources on cultural competence and ethno-specific information readily available to employees in the workplace?
- 5. Has a cultural self-assessment of your organisation been conducted, and if so, have strategies been implemented in the areas identified as needing further improvement?
- 6. Do you have a strong understanding of the cultural profile of your local community?
- 7. Are employees encouraged to be flexible in their approach and seek information on specific cultural behaviors or understandings so that interactions with staff, clients and partner organisations are sensitive to cultural differences?
- 8. Does higher management actively promote the benefits of cultural competence?
- 9. If you are delivering essential services do you have an adequate translating and interpreting policy?
- 10. Is there a system of incentives or rewards for initiatives in the workplace which are culturally competent?

* While the key principles of cultural competence are outlined in this guide, it is important to note that in practice there is no prescribed 'one size fits all' remedy. The ways in which an organisation can best improve its cultural competence will depend upon the nature and scope of the organisation. Therefore, the above questions should be viewed only as a general guide for organisations seeking to improve their cultural competence.