

Citation

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MULTICULTURAL READINESS IN SERVICE ECOSYSTEMS

Abstract

With growing numbers of migrants, foreign students, tourists and business travellers, modern servicescapes are increasingly becoming more multicultural. Hence, it is important for people from diverse cultural backgrounds to be able to interact effectively with one another in order to deliver optimum value to everyone involved in these intercultural interactions. However, there are no tools or benchmarks available for the service organisations to assess and improve their ability to engage with their increasingly diverse key stakeholders. In this study, we address this important research gap, by developing a new multidimensional construct, called ‘Multicultural Readiness’ (MR), and develop a scale to operationalise it at both individual and organisational levels. We also develop and test a conceptual model consisting of several antecedents and outcomes of MR to understand its impact within service ecosystems. Finally, we propose to develop an innovative benchmarking system as a managerial tool to help service organisations assess and improve their MR levels. This paper would extend our knowledge on this important topic by providing new theoretical and managerial insights.

Key Contributions

This paper would make a meaningful contribution to the current literature on intercultural service encounters and cross-cultural consumer behaviour, by introducing a new construct, called ‘Multicultural Readiness’ (MR) and developing a scale to operationalise this construct, called ‘Multicultural Readiness Instrument’ (MRI). We also develop and test a conceptual model with several important antecedents and outcomes of MR, and a benchmarking system to help service organisations assess and improve their level of multicultural readiness compared to their counterparts in the same service sector or the overall service ecosystem. Thus, this paper would help services organisations assess the extent to which they are ready and able to deal with their increasingly multicultural workplaces, consisting of employees, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Academic researchers could also use the MR scales to study the challenges and opportunities posed by growing cultural diversity in workplaces around the world. Besides extending the current conceptual knowledge about the attitudes and behaviours of multicultural organisations and their employees, this paper would also help service organisations assess and improve their employees’ ability to understand and manage the expectations of their culturally diverse customers and colleagues using the proposed benchmarking system. Besides these conceptual, empirical and managerial contributions, this research may also make a social contribution, by showcasing the growing cultural diversity in broader society and the need to understand, adapt and manage it in our everyday lives. In fact, we believe this would help prepare even ordinary people in any multicultural society to become aware, accept and embrace these social changes and help guide them to engage more effectively with their culturally diverse neighbours, service providers, civil servants, volunteers, foreign tourists and visitors, among others.

Introduction

Globalisation is making the whole world an increasingly interconnected place, leading to a rapid rise in the number of people who live, work, or travel to countries other than the place they were born. As reported by IOM (2020), the number of international migrants in 2019 was almost 272 million globally which is 1.81 times higher compared to twenty years ago and equates to 3.5 percent of the world's population. This indicates a fast increase in international migration particularly to countries like United States, Australia, and Canada where over 15 percent of their population are foreign-born (IOM, 2020). Statistics show the majority of international migrants (over 60 percent) are in the working age (IOM, 2020) and they are mainly employed in high-income countries (ILO, 2018). For instance, in Australia migrants made up to 27% of the workforces in the last 10 years (ABS, 2020). This offers a unique opportunity for organisations in multicultural societies to learn about the expectations of their culturally diverse customers and employees through intercultural encounters and through that manage these stakeholders more effectively.

However, there is considerable evidence that many organisations, such as in Australia for example, are not ready to take advantage of the growing cultural diversity of their customers and employees (ABC, 2019; Arvanitakis, 2019). This is despite the positive impact of embracing diversity can have on workplace productivity (Saxena, 2014), employee well-being (Jaiswal & Dyaram, 2018), and employee life satisfaction (Le et al., 2018), among others. In fact, there are many examples of organisations' failure to constructively manage cultural diversity in their multicultural workplaces (Hilton, 2019), such as under-representation of ethnic minorities in leadership, which results in higher staff turnover, legal and compliance risks, and negative publicity (AHRC, 2015). We posit that services organisations operating in multicultural societies can address these challenges and benefit from the opportunities offered by cultural diversity in their workplaces by creating a more productive and proficient multicultural service ecosystems. This would require training their existing employees at all levels and role types within the organization to help them learn how to interact more effectively with people from other cultures, coupled with recruiting employees that innately possess the ability to understand and/or manage cultural differences.

A review of relevant literature reveals many challenges in this regard. First, there is no consensus on the exact employee characteristics that the organisations may focus on to better understand the multi-cultural dynamics within and/or outside of the organization with their stakeholders. For example, constructs such as cultural intelligence, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence only focus on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of individuals towards other cultures. These also do not capture the extent to which people are ready to accept cultural differences and through that 'acceptance' engage with those from other cultures in a more positive manner. Second, for organisations to be willing and capable of engaging with persons from diverse cultural backgrounds, both their employees and the organisation as a whole need to be ready to engage with them. However, most existing constructs only relate to individuals and hence, it is not clear if the same constructs are applicable at a group level, such as a work-unit, whole organisations, an industry sector, society or even a nation state as a whole. Finally, there are no self-administered tools readily available to help organisations and employees assess and improve their level of readiness to manage interactions with people from diverse cultures and benchmark themselves with others in this regard.

We aim to address these knowledge gaps by conceptualising a new construct, 'Multicultural Readiness' (MR) and developing a multidimensional scale to operationalise this construct by

measuring its different facets. We will assess and establish the practical utility of this scale by testing the focal role of multicultural readiness relation to its link to several individual and organisational-level antecedents, and the effect of MR on important outcomes. Accordingly, in this paper, we aim to discover the level of ‘multicultural readiness’ of organisations within a service ecosystem, in terms of the ability and motivation of individuals and organizations to engage with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. We focus on service ecosystem in this paper because services dominate most economies in the world today, contributing to more than 80 percent of the GDP and the workforce in countries like USA, Canada, and Australia (DIIS, 2018). Moreover, services are largely characterised by interactions between individuals thus, the ability of persons from diverse backgrounds to interact with one another is requisite to optimise service ecosystem outcomes. We also aim to develop a benchmarking system to help individuals and organisations in the broader service sector to assess and improve their multicultural readiness on its relevant dimensions.

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Multicultural workforces pose challenges for organisations due to the differences in the expectations of their culturally diverse customers and colleagues (Sharma et al., 2009; 2018; Triandafyllidou, 2018). In this context, Earley and Ang (2003) define cultural intelligence (CQ) as the capability of an individual to function effectively in culturally diverse settings, with four (metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural) dimensions. Ang et al. (2007) offer a 20-item Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) to operationalise this construct and validate it through many studies. Van Dyne et al. (2012) identify 11 sub-dimensions of the four primary factors of CQ, including metacognitive CQ (planning, awareness, and checking), cognitive CQ (culture-general and context-specific knowledge), motivational CQ (intrinsic and extrinsic interest, and self-efficacy), and behavioural CQ (flexibility in verbal and non-verbal behaviours, and speech acts). However, despite its popularity in socio-psychological and organisational behaviour studies, CQ shows limited ability to predict employees’ cross-cultural adjustment process and job performance (Jyoti & Kour, 2017; Taras, 2020; Young et al., 2017).

Brinkmann and Van Weerdenburg (2014) introduce intercultural readiness check with four competencies, including, a) take interest in other cultures, b) adjust communication style, c) invest in relationships, and d) use cultural diversity to learn. However, these four competencies do not cover the entire gamut of intercultural experiences of employees in multicultural workplaces (Neculăesei, 2016). Moreover, other constructs, such as intercultural development inventory (Hammer et al., 2003), intercultural competence (Dias et al., 2017), and intercultural sensitivity (Arli & Bakan, 2018) show similar shortcomings. Typically, all these constructs are conceptualised and operationalised at the individual-level, despite growing realisation that organisations may also exhibit different levels of intercultural competencies due to their unique cultures, structures and processes (Vetráková & Smerek, 2016). As simply aggregating individual-level data for these construct may not accurately represent their organisation-level equivalent constructs (Lima et al., 2016) this tranche of research has clear limitations in explaining the broader service ecosystem that comprises not only individual employees and customers but also multiple service organizations.

Ang and Inkpen (2008) do attempt to conceptualise organisation-level CQ with three dimensions - managerial CQ, competitive CQ, and structural CQ. Moon (2010, p. 482) defines organisational CQ as “a set of organisational capabilities” and uses dynamic capability theory to identify three factors of organisational CQ - process CQ (patterns or routines of current practice), position CQ (specific organisational assets such as capabilities or knowledge), and

path CQ (history and subsequent dependencies of the organisation). More recently, Lima et al. (2016) reconceptualises organisation-level CQ with five dimensions, including, a) leadership behaviour, b) adaptability, c) training and development, d) intentionality, and (e) inclusion. However, a recent meta-analysis shows that most of these studies suffer from “discrepancy in empirical results, conceptualisations, and measurements” (Akhal, 2019; p.238) therefore placing constraints on any meaningful understanding of the multi-cultural dynamics within a broader service ecosystem.

We address all these limitations and research gaps in the literature by conceptualising a new multidimensional construct, ‘multicultural readiness’ (MR), at both individual and organisational levels. We also incorporate both these constructs into a single unified framework including relevant individual and organisation-level antecedents and outcomes of multicultural readiness. Next, we develop and validate a self-administered multidimensional scale to operationalise multicultural readiness and assess its utility using a unified multi-level conceptual model with several antecedents and outcomes of MR for both individual and organisations. Finally, we also aim to develop a benchmarking system using our MR scale for use by individuals and organisation in the services sector to help them improve their ability to engage with their culturally and linguistically diverse stakeholders by assessing their scores on its relevant dimensions.

Multicultural Readiness - Individual

Drawing on the definitions that depict ‘Readiness’ as “the state of being fully prepared for something” (Ramaseshan et al., 2015, p. 3), we define individual-level MR as an *individual’s ability to acquire and process multicultural knowledge in order to accept cultural differences, adapt one’s own behaviour and communicate effectively with people from other cultures*. Based on a preliminary literature review, we have adapted the numerous sub-dimensions of intercultural development inventory (Hammer et al., 2003), cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2007), intercultural competencies (Dias et al., 2017), and intercultural sensitivity (Arli & Bakan, 2018) to develop six underlying dimensions (knowledge, motivation, cognition, acceptance, adaptation, and communication) and nine sub-dimensions of individual-level multicultural readiness. In this paper, we aim to empirically validate these dimensions and sub-dimensions, and operationalise them by developing a self-administered questionnaire with specific items. We will validate this questionnaire using a rigorous and well-established empirical scale-development methodology (Studies 1 and 2).

Multicultural Readiness - Organisational

We define organisational MR as an *organisation’s ability to acquire and process multicultural knowledge by hiring and training multi-culturally ready employees with suitable HRM policies and strategies that facilitate appropriate behaviours and communications in multicultural work environments*. Next, we have adapted the dimensions of organisation-level cultural intelligence (Ang & Inkpen, 2008; Moon, 2010; Lima et al., 2016) based on our literature review, to develop six underlying dimensions of organisational-level MR, similar to those for individual-level multicultural readiness, but with five different sub-dimensions. Once again, we aim to empirically validate these dimensions and sub-dimensions, operationalise them with a self-administered questionnaire and validate the scale using a rigorous empirical methodology (Studies 1 and 2).

Multicultural Readiness – Antecedents and Outcomes

We have also developed a preliminary unified multi-level conceptual model consisting of several relevant antecedents and outcomes of both individual and organisational-level MR to show that individual employees and organisations may simultaneously develop their MR by managing its antecedents and this could improve their overall performance and other important outcomes. For example, we propose to include a suite of demographic (e.g., age, gender, education, role, and tenure etc.) and psychographic (e.g., personality traits, attitudes, and values etc.) variables as individual-level antecedents. Similarly, use organisation culture, a set of shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that influence employee attitudes and behaviours (Odor, 2018) and organisation characteristics (e.g., age, size, service type, cultural, ethnic and gender diversity etc.) as the organisation-level antecedents. Finally, we use employee performance (Presbitero, 2016), job satisfaction, and well-being (Diao & Park, 2012) as individual-level employee outcomes; interaction comfort, customer satisfaction and well-being (Sharma et al., 2016) as individual-level customer outcomes; and overall performance (Chen et al., 2011), internal service quality, and service climate (Fung et al., 2017) as organisation-level outcomes. Figure 1 shows our preliminary multi-level conceptual model with all the hypothesised relationships. We further refine this conceptual model by adding more relevant antecedents and outcomes, and exploring potential mediators and moderators as well. Finally, we test this model and all the hypothesised relationships using a rigorous empirical study (Study 3).

Methodology

We begin by conceptualising the MR construct based on an extensive review of the relevant literature and then develop the MR scale at both individual and organisational levels using well-established scale development procedure consisting of both qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g., Sharma, 2015). Next, we validate the MR scale and assess its practical utility by testing our conceptual model using another quantitative study. Finally, we develop a benchmarking system that can be used by individuals and organisations in broader services sector to help improve their level of multicultural readiness. We focus on Australian services sector as the study context because the Australian economy is dominated by services which represents over 70 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) and 80 percent of employment (DFAT, 2017). Overall, economic productivity is a function of how stakeholders in the various service ecosystems across the economy work together in the most effective manner.

Phase I - Scale Development (Study 1 and 2)

We began by updating our literature review to refine the dimensions and sub-dimensions of multicultural readiness at both individual and organisational levels already identified by us. Next, we generated an initial pool of scale items using our updated literature review. We conducted interviews with 21 employees working in Australian services sector using a snowballing approach (*Study 1a*). In order to shortlist the items based on their relevance, we used NVivo software and Excel to analyse the interview transcripts. We then assessed the face and content validity of the shortlisted items by asking six experts (from academia and industry) to rate the extent to which the items represent at least one of the dimensions of our MR construct (*Study 1b*). Next (*Study 2*), we developed a self-administered questionnaire with the final list of items and conduct a survey of at least 400 participants for each survey, equally divided among males and females, and Australian-born and foreign-born migrants who work in the Australian services sector using an online panel. We used exploratory factor analysis to purify the MR scale by examining the psychometric properties of all the items and the dimensions

underlying the MR construct.

Phase II - Scale Validation (Study 3)

To validate the final MR scale and test our conceptual model, we used another self-administered survey with at least 400 participants for each survey similar in profile to our first survey, working in Australian services sector. We used a structured questionnaire with the MR scale and well-established scales to measure all its antecedents and outcomes, including ethnocentrism (Sharma, 2015), organisation culture (Lok & Crawford, 2004), employee performance (Sharma et al., 2016), job satisfaction (Sharma et al., 2016), organisational performance (Wall et al., 2004). We tested the reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, dimensionality, and measurement invariance of MR scale using well-established procedures. We also tested the nomological validity of the multicultural readiness scale by assessing its correlations with all the other scales and its predictive validity by testing our path model using structural equation modelling approach.

Phase III – Benchmarking System (Study 4)

Finally, we would review the relevant benchmarking literature (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2014) to develop an appropriate benchmarking system for individuals and organisations to help them use our new MR scale as a diagnostic tool to identify specific areas for improvement in their level of multicultural readiness. We would validate our benchmarking system with an expert panel consisting of representatives from a cross-section of Australian service organisations in private, public and not-for-profit sectors. This enables service organisations to use this tool to compare themselves with other organizations in terms of average scores for their employee- and/or organisation-level multicultural readiness. We would use these average scores as a preliminary set of benchmarks and fine-tune these in future as we continue to collect more data to from different sectors within broader Australian services ecosystem.

Results

Study 1a: A total of 12 women and 9 men with an average age of 38 years were interviewed. Ninety percent of participants had a Bachelor degree or higher. By birthplace, interviewees represented 11 different countries. After conducting and transcribing the 21 interviews, 1184 statements were identified which were grouped under 178 codes, 31 categories and 7 themes. The seven main themes are comprised of (1) IND MR; (2) ORG MR; (3) MR, antecedents and outcomes; (4) cultural diversity, challenges and opportunities; (5) ICSEs; (6) B2B interactions; and (7) others. Under the first theme, eight categories emerged from the data - that refer to characteristics of individuals who are multi-culturally ready, including acceptance, adaptation, comfort with other cultures, awareness, motivation, perceived benefits, willingness to adapt, and communication confidence. The second theme demonstrates the specifications of multi-culturally ready organisations, which is comprised of six categories including acceptance, communication, adaptation of policies, human resource practices, and services, as well as motivation. The comprehensive literature review and analysis of interview transcripts resulted in the development of the initial versions of the questionnaires that can possibly measure MR at both individual and organisational levels. *Study 1b:* To assess the face and content validity of the initially developed scales, six expert judges from industry and academia reviewed the dimensions and scale items. Analysis shows 4 items of the IND MRI and 2 items of the ORG MRI did not meet the requirement of face validity. However, there was no issue with content validity. Hence, we kept all items for further analysis.

Study 2: To further purify the scales, we collected 416 and 689 usable data for IND MRI and ORG MRI respectively. We assessed the data for CMV using the Harman's single-factor test. The output confirms that CMV was not a concern in this research as the total variance explained by the single factor was 41.34% and 47.14% for IND MRI and ORG MRI respectively, which is less than the 50% threshold (Podsakoff et al., 2012). We then computed Cronbach's Alpha (α) using SPSS 26 to check if each dimension reflects the subset it measures. The values of α for all the dimensions of both instruments were above the 0.7 minimum cut-off, presented acceptable internal consistency. After assessing factor reliability, we continued the scale purification process by executing exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with Principal Axis Factoring method and Promax rotation using SPSS 26. To measure sample adequacy, we computed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. Result shows the KMO for both instruments were >0.9 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were significant, indicating the suitability of data for analysis. The EFA output with Eigen values >1 explained $> 60\%$ of the total variance in the data for both IND MRI and ORG. However, we found some items with low factor loadings and high cross-factor loading which indicate potential convergent and discriminant validity issues. To rectify the problems, we looked at each item carefully and reworded the ambiguous items to provide more clarity in meaning. We also decided to remove the items that could not be fixed and where the scale would benefit by their omission. Before deciding to remove any item, we closely examined them to see how important they are for the relevant latent variable and we attempted to fix the problem when possible. The refined scales were the basis for our next studies.

Study 3: To validate the scales, we collected 414 and 416 usable data for IND MRI and ORG MRI respectively. We assessed the data for CMV using the Harman's single-factor test and found no issue. The values of α for all the dimensions of IND MRI and ORG MRI were above 0.7, presented acceptable internal consistency. To further assess the instruments and validate them, we will use CFA and SEM using AMOS 25 and report our results in our final paper.

Discussion and Implications

This paper addresses a significant gap in intercultural service encounters research by extending the important line of thinking from 'competence' to encapsulate the concept of 'readiness'. By conceptualising MR, it paves the way to move beyond the 'competence boundaries' and investigate how individuals and organisations can put their competence into play to effectively embrace multiculturalism and reap the benefits it potentially creates. Next, it introduces two scales to measure MR at both individual and organisational levels. This study contributes to the services marketing literature that is impacted upon by the level and nature of multiculturalism by not only assessing knowledge, abilities, and skills but also the propensity of both service employees and the service organization to behave in a multi-culturally appropriate way to optimize service related outcomes. MRI will also help service organizations operating in multicultural societies assess their individual employee and overall organizational-level MR, and investigate their strengths and weakness in the provision of services within culturally diverse settings. Understanding the MR level of individuals and identifying the ways to make them more multi-culturally ready is important in increasing their readiness to engage in a meaningful manner with those from other culture which leads to be more successful in multicultural organisations in terms of achieving individual goals, show better performance, and be more satisfied with the job. This is important to help service marketers develop their further multicultural service offerings accordingly. Moreover, organisational-level MR not only can help employees to accomplish their work in a better environment which helps them

to flourish and be more successful, but also helps organisations to serve better services to a wide variety of customers coming from various cultures. This increase the organisation’s performance and helps them to stand out among other competitors.

Limitations and Future Research

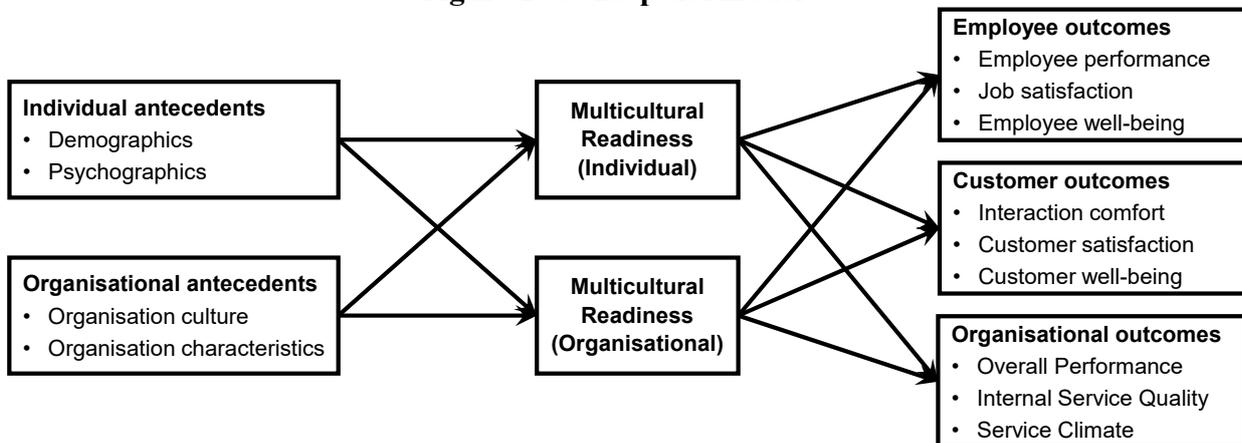
Although this study attempts to conceptualises and operationalise MR, future research can attempt to improve this work in various ways. First, this paper is based on the authors’ literature review of prior studies in intercultural and cross-cultural domain and their own qualitative research with employees working in the services sector in Australia. Future research can create new insights by conducting qualitative research that targets people from diverse cultural backgrounds who live in multicultural countries around the world with the hope to explore new factors that contribute to the proposed MR dimensions. Second, for the scale refinement and validation purposes, the present study collects data from employees working in the services sector in Australia. Future research is required to empirically test the newly proposed scales using a different research setting to further validate the instruments. Finally, future research can examine other predictors and outcomes of IND MR and ORG MR other than the ones we proposed in this study.

Table 1: A summary of MR Dimensions

Dimensions	Sub dimension	Definition
Multicultural Readiness (Individual)		
1. Knowledge	Cultural Knowledge	Knowledge of differences and similarities in social norms and acceptable behaviours in diverse cultures
	Contextual Knowledge	Knowledge of cultural diversity in the context
2. Motivation	Self interest	Interest to continuously acquire and update cultural knowledge
	Perceived Benefits	Interest in cultural diversity as it offers people personal benefits
3. Cognition	-	Ability to process knowledge about diverse cultures
4. Acceptance	-	Willingness to acknowledge and accept cultural diversity
5. Adaptation	Ability to Adapt	Ability to adjust own behaviour in multicultural settings
	Willingness to Adapt	Willingness to put extra effort to adjust own behaviour in multicultural settings
6. Communication	Communication Effectiveness	Ability to communicate effectively across cultures
	Communication Confidence	Feel confident enough to communicate across cultures
	Communication Comfort	Feel at ease when communicating across cultures
Multicultural Readiness (Organisational)		
1. Knowledge	-	Organisational awareness of cultural diversity in the countries it operates in and among its stakeholders
2. Motivation	-	Organisational willingness to continuously improve

		cultural knowledge at all organisational levels
3. Cognition	-	Organisational ability to understand and process cultural knowledge
4. Acceptance	Willingness to accept	Organisational willingness to accept and embrace cultural diversity
	Perceived benefits	Acknowledge cultural diversity as a valuable resource of knowledge and competence for the organisation
5. Adaptation	Adaptation-Policy	Organisational ability to adjust its procedures, rules, and regulations (i.e. policies) to guide organisational decisions and actions for creating a culturally inclusive environment.
	Adaptation-Human resources practices	Organisational ability to adjust its human resource activities to ensure cultural equity in attracting, motivating, evaluating, and developing employees from diverse cultural backgrounds and fostering the promotion of cultural competence in the organisation
	Adaptation-Service	Organisational ability to adjust its services to ensure the needs of people from diverse cultural backgrounds are taken into consideration and services are understandable which can meet diverse cultural expectations
6. Communication		Organisational ability to nurture and encourage multicultural communication with its stakeholders

Figure 1: Conceptual model



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