ANZMAC 2021 Conference, Melbourne
(29 Nov - 1 Dec 2021)

<u>**Special Session**</u>

Navigating Inter-Cultural Experiences in Australian Community Services Ecosystem

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Introduction

Most developed countries (including Australia) have become more culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) in recent decades (Koerner & Pillay, 2019), which has resulted in a rapid rise in intercultural service encounters (ICSEs) among customers and employees across a wide range of service settings within private, public and not-for-profit sectors (Fung et al., 2017; Gaur et al., 2017; Sharma et al., 2009; 2012; 2015; 2016; 2018; Tam et al., 2014; 2016). However, most of these studies focus on service outcomes, such as perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty, and ignore other important outcomes for the customers and employees from CaLD backgrounds, including their subjective well-being and quality of lives (Allotey et al., 2002; Fejzic & Barker, 2019; Kong et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2021; Zuhair, Wickremasinghe, & Natoli, 2015). As a result, despite growing evidence about the positive impact of a diverse workplace on workplace productivity (Saxena, 2014), employee wellbeing (Jaiswal & Dyaram, 2018), and employee life satisfaction (Le et al., 2018), it is still not clear how diverse service ecosystems may impact CaLD customers and employees. What we do know is that intercultural interactions provide an opportunity to both customers and employees to learn about each other in order to develop the ability for mutually beneficial relationships in the long run (Triandafyllidou, 2018).

In view of the above, there is a clear need to explore and understand the capabilities and level of readiness of service ecosystems to engage with persons from CaLD backgrounds and navigate through intercultural experiences in a more effective manner. We aim to address this important research priority in our proposed special session, by focusing on the Australian community care services providers to highlight the challenges faced by them in their ecosystems. An underlying theme in the session pertains to unravelling such challenges, and in particular identify how service providers can best navigate the range of intercultural experiences (NICE) within their ecosystems. Accordingly, we plan to invite our industry participants to share their experiences of operating within CaLD environments to provide useful insights about effective strategies to help engage with stakeholders (employees and customers) from diverse backgrounds. We plan to extend current knowledge on navigating intercultural experiences (NICE) in service ecosystems by exploring important emerging themes in collaboration with our industry partners.

Themes and Participants

1. Understanding the policy framework for navigating intercultural service experiences (Dr Rita Afsar, Research Fellow (Honorary), University of Western Australia).

With over half of the Australians, having one or both parents born overseas, Australia is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. Cultural diversity benefits Australian economy and society via in-bound tourism, education, global linkages, productivity, labour participation, taxation revenue income, and innovations, along with general community vibrancy, resilience, and adaptability. Diversity 'dividend' is an emerging idea flowing from the positive development outcomes associated with diversity. Research in Canada shows that 1% increase in ethno-cultural diversity may lead to 2.4% and a 0.5% increase in revenue and workplace productivity. However, migrants in Australia often experience barriers, such as non-recognition of international educational qualifications and professional experience, lack of access to relevant networks, and unconscious biases in hiring practices, especially in the services sector, which require higher levels of interpersonal interactions. To reap fuller diversity dividends, Australia needs to break down barriers faced by migrants in their workplace and in the society, by addressing myths and fears of immigration, and countering discriminatory practices.

2. Dealing with challenges facing people from CaLD backgrounds in the mental health sector: An NGO perspective (Adrian Munro, CEO Richmond Wellbeing).

Richmond Wellbeing (RW) is the largest NGO provider of inclusive, community-based mental health and wellbeing support services across Western Australia. RW employs leading practices to support the recovery and wellbeing of people with mental health issues to help them grow the confidence and skills needed to meet the challenges of daily life, and to discover and build a better life. Unfortunately, we see CaLD communities overrepresented in so many of our services. We see a very strong stigma around mental distress in these communities and this makes many reluctant to access services. When they do reach out for help, they mostly struggle to find culturally safe and trauma informed services. At RW, we consider it our responsibility to learn how to provide culturally safe services for the CaLD community, we have a very diverse workforce and we train staff in trauma informed care. Our strong desire is to continue to improve in this area and to see the sector as a whole make significant strides forward in culturally safe and inclusive practice for CaLD communities.

3. Exploring the challenges and opportunities for the new migrants into Western Australia (Stuart Tomlinson, CEO Multi-Cultural Futures).

Multicultural Futures (MF) aims to build a dynamic enterprise that gives refugees and migrants the skills and support they need for a better quality of life. MF has developed a model of support that is accessible and culturally responsive supporting individuals and families access the right support at the right time and delivered in the right way. First, we listen to you, your story, and hopes for the future, before exploring the options and way forward. This takes time and expertise; taking into consideration clients' culture, social and family context, religious/spiritual beliefs, pre-arrival experiences, perception of mental health services, and possible stigma associated with mental illness. We understand a 'quick fix' is unlikely to support progress

towards long-term outcomes. With a focus on mental health and wellbeing for the last 20 years and coverage across the Perth Metro area, we recently extended support to disability, and alcohol and other drugs. Our game changing Community Ambassador program works with key people in the community who are bi-lingual, bi-cultural, connected, and trusted in their communities. Community ambassadors are trained in key sensitive areas (e.g. mental health messages, harm minimisation, alcohol and other drugs, and suicide) and engaged to share this information in their own communities

4. **Challenges facing a multi-cultural aging population (Henrietta Podgorska, Communications and Community Engagement Manager, Umbrella Multicultural Community Care).**

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse nations globally, and workplace diversity is today's reality. A diverse workforce is essential as it provides numerous benefits such as innovation, economic growth, and new opportunities. This means organisations that learn to manage this cultural diversity will be competitive. However, organisations that ignore this fact will risk failure in the future. This presentation will build a case to prove that managing cultural diversity is not a trendy social issue but a serious business approach with moral, social, and legal implications. The presentation will showcase Umbrella Multicultural Community Care Services Inc. and how the organisation successfully delivers aged care services in the community with a very diverse workforce in Perth, Western Australia. The presentation will also explore how this diversity and the knowledge gained from managing such a workforce can lead to other opportunities here in Australia and overseas.

5. **Engaging multicultural communities in swimming and water safety programming (Lauren Nimmo, Senior Manager Health, Research and Communications, Royal Life Saving Society WA)**

Royal Life Saving WA is the leading water safety education organisation in Australia and works to empower to community to be safe in and around water as well as leading efforts to reduce the impact of drowning on the WA community. Drowning occurs in all communities and recent data shows that multicultural communities are at greater risk of drowning in WA, with 37.9% of drowning deaths involving someone born overseas in 2020. While research is limited, there is some evidence that shows that participation in formal swimming lessons can reduce the risk of drowning, particularly amongst young children. Despite over 200,000 children participating in swimming and water safety programs each year in WA, participation rates are significantly lower amongst multicultural communities. As an organisation, we are committed to ensuring that all Western Australians have the opportunity to learn swimming and water safety skills and that no one misses out. Led by our Inclusion team and Multicultural Steering Committee, we deliver a number of free and subsidised multicultural swimming programs for children and adults with men's only and women's only programs run throughout the state to encourage participation. We are also working with the aquatics industry to build workforce capacity and cultural readiness to ensure aquatic facilities are inclusive. The challenge remains to ensure that all multicultural communities are aware of the importance of gaining swimming and water safety skills and can easily access these programs. We understand the need to be innovative in the ways that we communicate with multicultural communities as traditional forms of communication are unlikely to be effective and individual communities have differing needs.

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