**Strengthening Australian Interculturalism:**

**Quality, Support and Growth**

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Almost 50 years ago, Martin Luther King wrote: *"People don't get along because they fear each other. They fear each other because they do not know each other. They do not know each other because they have not properly communicated with each other."* This is as true today as it was then,

This is where interculturalists come in.

While multiculturalism is a policy supporting the principles of cultural heritage, social inclusion, cohesion and harmony, within the rule of law, its successful implementation depends on applying the principles of interculturalism.

Interculturalism is a philosophy based on the belief that dialogue, interaction and civility among people of diverse cultural backgrounds is the foundation of a successful multicultural society and effective intercultural and international relationships.,

As interculturalists working in Australia and abroad, we need to ask ourselves; how are we doing? What is the quality of our work? How effective are we in overcoming fear and ignorance? In helping people to enhance their cultural intelligence? Are we making a difference? Are we reaching enough people and organisations? What are the roles of a professional association? And what is the way ahead for SIETAR Australia?

I would like to briefly present my perspective on these questions, based on nearly four decades working as an interculturalist in Australia, considering three factors; quality, support and growth.

**Quality: The Research Findings**

In 2006 and again in 2008, with the help of teams of other experienced interculturalists, I managed two fairly large research studies into the scope and effectiveness of intercultural training. The first, funded by the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, surveyed over 1000 public sector training participants, managers and trainers. The second, funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research surveyed 300 VET graduates, trainers and managers with a focus on the private sector, replicated the core questions of the first study. These studies, which I believe are among the largest of their kind in the world, have been cited and downloaded hundreds of times here and abroad. (Links are provided below)

What did we learn from the combined 1359 responses, including 794 training participants and 563 managers and trainers?

Both studies, with the second corroborating and expanding on the findings of the first, provided empirical evidence of the effectiveness – and limitations – of cross-cultural or intercultural training.

The key findings were that most training participants, while receiving an average of only 6.1 hours’ training, rated the training highly. There were statistically significant gains in participants’ knowledge of intercultural skills, diverse cultures, workplace issues and policies, confidence in interactions and, to a lesser extent, cultural self-awareness.

The average satisfaction rating of workshops and facilitators was 80%, with 65% of respondents giving ratings of good or excellent and expressing interest in further training. Half said their workshop should have been longer and more interactive.

Over 70% reported improvements in customer service and workplace relations. Half said the training had also improved their interpersonal relationships and 57% rated the contribution of training to job performance as above average or excellent. Only 28%, however, said they were able to transfer their learning to colleagues, not surprising given the brevity and typically basic levels of training

85% would recommend the training to others in similar occupations. In my own and other colleagues’ training evaluation surveys, this percentage is now well over 90%.

77% said cross-cultural training should be mandatory for everyone in their organisation – especially their managers – and 89% said it should be mandatory for everyone in customer/client contact. Numerous additional comments recommended that the training should be mandatory for immigrants on arrival.

The majority of managers in both surveys agreed that cultural competence contributes directly to organisational effectiveness and social capital in communities. Support for intercultural training was strongest among first line managers but weakest among senior managers and executives (which brings up a whole other discussion). Managers commonly complained that it was very hard to find ‘good’ trainers. There was no way of measuring their quality or relevance to their needs and no benchmarks or accreditations to guide them.

The surveys of intercultural trainers showed that they were well-qualified, mainly female (77%) and bilingual (68%) with an average of 15 years’ experience. Their average age – ten years ago - was 48, raising the important issue of succession planning. None were younger than 35.

Although respondents were highly committed to the philosophy of interculturalism, intercultural training was rarely their sole activity, with trainers delivering an average of 20 1-day workshops a year. Several reported that insufficient quantity of work was a significant obstacle to pursuing an independent career.

There was vigorous discussion among trainers about the desirability for accreditation; 70% agreed that some standards would be helpful, others said the market should decide. Less than half recommended a formal accreditation and just over half recommended a national register based on limited selection criteria.

Several trainers commented on the need for translating academic research and dialogue into accessible training formats for general audiences. Everyone commented on the lack of formal professional development opportunities in Australia. The majority recommended the establishment of a professional association which would support peer contact, professional development and advocacy, with particular reference to SIETAR as model.

So, we can safely say that intercultural training works, and that there is a need for increased and improved provision of services. The extent to which these findings have influenced any real increase in such training in Australia is impossible to tell. On the anecdotal evidence, not by much. Clearly, these research studies – all 300 pages of them - demand further study and replication.

**Support: Submissions and Advocacy**

This brings me to the question of ensuring greater support and advocacy for intercultural training, education and development.

Over the last 30 years or so, I and numerous colleagues have called for greater support for interculturalism and increased training provision. The responses, in funding for research, resource development and training have been variable depending on political and economic climates.

In 2011 the Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Migration conducted a national Inquiry into multiculturalism. Of the 488 submissions received, many expressing very negative views of multiculturalism, a few called for greater efforts in cultural competence development to support social cohesion. I was invited to present my submission to a panel of MPs and Senators at the public hearings in Adelaide. Following the lively hearing, all recorded in Hansard, I was invited to provide supplementary submissions detailing the two research studies.

Later that year the federal government commissioned a White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century. I revised my original submission to focus on business and diplomacy and once more, on the basis of my arguments, I was invited, as a supplier of intercultural services, to a national forum of senior business, government and academic representatives.

The central premise of both submissions was that while there is solid research and ample anecdotal evidence that organisations and individuals can directly contribute to social wellbeing and economic growth by developing their cultural competence, very few organisations, public or private, actively support such training. I argued that it is directly in the national domestic and international interest to promote and resource the expansion, professionalism and sustainability of cultural competence and cross-cultural skills training programs for all organisations.

I estimated from informally surveying intercultural training providers around Australia that around eighty thousand employees per year were receiving an average of 6 hours' training. [ I was unable to determine the scope and volume of intercultural education in the academic and community sectors, which I suspect is quite large. ] While this appears to be a credible level of activity, it represented then less than one percent of the workforce. Furthermore, although participants constantly say they wish their managers had been at their workshops, less than 3% of these participants were managers.

In such a culturally diverse society, operating in a global economy, it may seem strange that so few managers and even fewer senior executives and political leaders have been exposed to - let alone become skilled in - the fundamental principles and strategies of intercultural communication and organisational cultural competence development.

The main reason for this is that they do not perceive a compelling business case for cultural competence because it is simply not well understood or measured in terms of organisational or professional performance. Business and government decision makers are largely unaffected by the small, daily consequences of cultural incompetence and unaware of – or indifferent to - the potential rewards of investing in the efforts required to achieve meaningful levels of cultural competence in enterprises. Historically, the majority of demands for training are reactions to problems, such as customer complaints or workforce tensions, rather than proactive approaches to minimise the problems and maximise the benefits of cultural diversity.

The historically low level of demand for cross-cultural training can be attributed to several other factors including competing priorities, misperceptions of the nature of this type of training, the brevity, irregularity, basic level and uneven quality of provision and the lack of any benchmarks or guidelines for selecting appropriate training strategies and providers.

There are several free training resources, both public domain and proprietary, but they are not effectively promoted to governments and businesses from a business, economic or social cohesion case.

Capacity to meet increased demand is limited. As I stated to the Australia in the Asian Century forum, after many senior executives around the table had emphasised the need for increased ‘Asia Literacy’, if even 5% of their industry’s enterprises suddenly requested help, all of us ‘suppliers’ would be swamped and faced with a severe lack of available talent. One established intercultural consultancy had recently received 170 responses to a job advertisement, and had to interview 50 short listed applicants before being able to recruit three new trainers.

I reiterated the research findings that there were no formal professional development programs or pathways for intercultural trainers, other than academic courses, that would ensure improved capability and increased capacity in the future.

In summary, I submitted that it is clearly time to raise our thinking to the levels of systemic and organisational strategies for operating competently in a multicultural society and globalised economy. It is time to firmly position cultural competence within the broader, strategic contexts of Australia's human and social capital.

I made several recommendations to replace the historically ad hoc, compartmentalised and short-lived efforts of the past 40 years with a coordinated and sustained commitment to cultural competence development

My submissions summarised the more detailed research report recommendations in terms of four actions;

First.

Analyse the situation. Survey and evaluate the current scope and state of cultural competence development and practice in the public and private sectors.

Second.

Enable and encourage systems and organisations to establish their practical social and economic business cases for developing cultural competence by identifying the degree to this will help them achieve their objectives, avoiding the consequences of cultural incompetence and realise the many benefits of cultural diversity.

Third.

Provide the tools for the job. Establish, promote and support a central clearing house of existing free training resources, research studies, discussion papers and management tools to help enterprises and trainers to design, conduct, benchmark and sustaining cultural competence development programs. Commission the production of new resources as required.

Fourth.

Increase training capability by designing and promoting professional development pathways and programs for current trainers. Increase training capacity by establishing train-the-trainer programs for in-house trainers and for new entrants to the intercultural field.

Australia has the expertise, the networks and the learning resources to implement these recommendations. The costs would be far outweighed by realising the many benefits of being culturally competent and avoiding the costs of being culturally incompetent.

**Growth: The Way Ahead for SIETAR Australasia**

I would like to finish by considering the role and future of SIETAR Australasia in particular in terms of the three dimensions of quality, support and growth.

A visit to the websites of the well-established SIETAR Europa and SIETAR USA websites will show ways in which the Australian branch can develop to offer real value to its members.

**Quality**

One of SIETAR Australasia’s most important roles is to promote professionalism and service quality in the field. Members can identify, share and promote best practice in intercultural training, education and research.

The association can present, uphold and promote the values of interculturalism and the ethical standards of professional conduct to which SIETAR members worldwide subscribe.

The annual conference can be supplemented with webinars, local and regional professional development workshops and state level conferences.

**Support**

Clearly the association needs greatly increased membership support as well as external funding and support to help the team to develop the website and other member services.

Increased effort and advocacy is needed to encourage intercultural trainers, educators and researchers to join the association. Current members and other supporters should investigate and link up with existing networks, support mechanisms and alliances.

The association needs to attract external funding through advocacy based on the research findings and all of the submissions made to the 2011 inquiry and the 2012 white paper. Initially, a modest grant to fund the work of a secretariat is needed.

While volunteerism is the foundation of successful professional associations, supported by membership fees, experience shows that without permanent presence, progress is uneven and eventually unsustainable.

**Growth**

How can SIETAR Australasia gain sufficient momentum to increase its credibility and relevance to Australian interculturalists?

All members need to reach out and make personal recommendations to their colleagues and other professional networks to join SIETAR, thus providing it with critical mass and increased operating funds.

Attracting new members depends on demonstrating the potential benefits, particularly by referring to the offerings of the European, American and other national associations. A professionally designed and maintained website can provide relevant news, links professional development opportunities and free articles and other resources.

With additional funding, SIETAR could even aspire to host the recommended national clearing house of intercultural resources.

A register of members with professional profiles can enhance marketing and collaborations.

Promoting the work of other intercultural providers and multicultural support agencies would encourage reciprocal promotion of SIETAR membership.

In conclusion, I would like to sincerely congratulate Hatice Sitki and the other volunteers who have worked hard, operating on extremely limited funds, to establish SIETAR Australasia. It has not been easy, I know, given the fact that most Australian interculturalists have been managing for years without a dedicated professional association. There are also the logistical challenges of overcoming inertia and scepticism and raising awareness of the existence and potential benefits of joining a national association.

Since joining SIETAR Australasia I include my membership in my professional profile as I believe this demonstrates my commitment to professionalism, ethical standards of conduct and mutual support. I encourage interculturalists across Australia to join me and all of the other inaugural members of SIETAR Australasia in helping to sustain and grow a professional association through which we can collectively strengthen Australian interculturalism.

**Research Report Links**

The Effectiveness of Cross-Cultural Training in the Australian Context (November 2006)

Robert Bean et al, for Standing Committee on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, managed by Dept of Immigration & BCitizenship

<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/research/index.htm>

Cross-Cultural Training and Workplace Performance (September 2008)

Robert Bean, for National Centre for Vocational Education Research

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2027.html>

Robert Bean’s Submissions to Federal Government are available on request;

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