

# Race, Power and Privilege

‘Cultural competence’ refers to the knowledge, skills and awareness of cultural differences and similarities within, among and between groups. It is important to translate this ‘competence’ into professional practice, so that all social groups are treated with respect and in recognition of their diversity. Professional practice includes staff roles in service delivery at all levels and in all sections of UniSC.

## The competency-based approach

This ‘competency’ based model goes beyond the traditional ‘trait-based’ approaches to developing cultural sensitivity. The trait-based approach (eg Chinese/Muslims are ...) is often one-dimensional and can stereotype groups outside the dominant group (ie Anglo-Christian) in contemporary Western societies. It can stereotype dominant groups as well. ‘Competency’ based approaches, on the other hand, cultivate a broader and more sophisticated understanding of race and culture through applying a power-sensitive analysis to the issues. This enables the recognition of the locations of power within relationships and the ways this power is manifested in the University. The ‘competency’ based approach is transformative and strives to engage deeply by facilitating behaviour change in both the personal and professional lives of participants. The process therefore meaningfully engages, sustains, and deepens understandings about the impact of race, power, and privilege at multiple levels. (See Information Folio: Culturally Inclusive Environment for how race is positioned in this approach). The approach is premised on three key conceptual elements:

### 1. Talking about race

It is widely acknowledged that many Australians feel uncomfortable talking about race (Innes, 2009) and prefer to use the less controversial ‘culture’ or ‘ethnic background’. If there is to be real change however, it is imperative that the various dimensions of race are discussed such as the demographic profile, the racial achievement ‘gap’ in higher education, representation and distribution in employment across institutions of higher education and beyond, eg the low representation of Indigenous Australian students in higher education, negligible or limited representation of visible minorities in senior management in State and Federal Parliaments.

### 2. Understanding white race privilege

Privilege, in its simplest definition, is understood to be those rights, benefits and advantages enjoyed by a person or body of persons beyond the advantages of other individuals. Majority group refers to the largest group, while a minority group is a group with fewer members represented in the social system. For the purposes of a discussion about privilege, majority group also signifies the group that has historically held advantages in terms of power and economic resources.

In an Australian context it refers to those from an Anglo-Christian background. ‘Whiteness studies’ originating in the US during the 1990s, is a term used to describe the body of scholarship that explores what it means to be ‘white’ in both a country-specific and more global context. Scholarly activity in the

race area historically regarded 'white' as being the norm and has almost never examined images of 'white' people. Inequity, oppression and an imbalance of power are further entrenched by positioning 'white' as the reference point.

While campuses have been responding incrementally to diversity, the nature of the response has largely been located in the 'disadvantage' paradigm - 'migrant', 'Indigenous' and 'International student' have been used as signifiers for the other. An examination of 'whiteness' addresses this gap and we can begin to see how it can impede the achievement of an environment that values and affirms diversity, thereby diminishing the ability of some staff and students to fully participate in all facets of university life. In higher education, privilege means that Anglo-Australian staff and students generally:

- will not have to fear rejection from their colleagues or classmates if they have different world views, customs or practices.
- will not consider their race or cultural background (including accent) as a reason for not getting a job or promotion.
- will not suffer from an absence of role models, sponsors or mentors.
- will not require information about the potential adverse impact of racism in higher education.
- will be familiar with the language of educational instruction and business transaction, including acronyms and colloquialisms, in both the student and staff environments.
- will enjoy texts and examples within the curriculum that largely reflect and affirm their own cultural background and experience and, as an extension, will accrue the benefits of a culturally biased curriculum.
- will not be expected to advocate for their race nor have their behaviour judged as representative of all their race.
- will not be excluded from social activities. The above discussion demonstrates how acknowledging whiteness— especially when combined with the concept of privilege— has the capacity to drive social and cultural transformation.

### **3. Substantive equality**

Formal equality prescribes equal treatment of all people regardless of circumstances, on the understanding that all have the same rights and entitlements. Substantive equality, on the other hand, affirms and values difference and goes beyond mere equality. Formal equality assumes a 'one size fits all' approach implying everyone should be treated equally, whereas substantive equality takes into account the effects of past discrimination.

Substantive equality recognises that equal or the same application of rules to unequal groups can have unequal results. It recognises that rights, entitlements, opportunities and access are not equally distributed throughout society. Hence, it is necessary to treat people differently because people have different needs. It allows all members of a society to give to others what they are individually entitled to, whether it is respect, high expectations, opportunity or dignity, regardless of their race. In order to practice substantive equality, it is necessary to recognise and take differences into account when involved in service delivery, teaching, supervising, event management and all activities/interactions. This is also relevant for staff interactions with each other and student interactions with staff and will result in improved efficiencies through more targeted services.

### **References and resources**

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