

Cultural Competence

*Building Awareness, Skills and
Inclusion*



Aims and Learning Steps

Developed by the ASRC ASVET team, this module is designed for educators and staff working with people seeking asylum and refugees.

Our goals are to:

- Define cultural competence and why it matters.
- Explore the stages of cultural learning: awareness, responsiveness, intelligence and competency.
- Identify unconscious and conscious biases that shape our interactions. Develop skills for self-awareness, listening and continuous improvement.

Activity: Take a moment to write down what 'cultural competence' means to you. How does it differ from cultural awareness?

What is Cultural Competence?

Cultural competence involves advancing through the stages of cultural awareness, sensitivity, and intelligence. It reflects the capacity to adapt behaviour, attitudes, and communication to foster respectful acceptance and meaningful engagement with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Developing cultural competence is an ongoing process that requires a combination of values, knowledge, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately across cultures.



Cornerstones of Cultural Competency

Awareness

Examine your own values, beliefs and unconscious biases to understand how they shape your worldview.

Responsiveness /Attitude

Develop an open, respectful mindset and be conscious of emotional reactions to cultural differences.

Knowledge

Seek information about other cultures; broaden your perspective by learning histories, norms and traditions.

Skills/Ability

Apply your learning through effective communication, problem solving and decision making across cultures.

***Activity: Which cornerstone do you most want to develop?
Make a note and discuss with a peer.***

Biases and Microaggressions

Unconscious bias (implicit bias): subconscious stereotypes or prejudices we hold about a group without realizing it. They influence our decisions and behaviour.

Conscious bias (explicit bias): attitudes and behaviours we deliberately exhibit toward certain groups. This involves intentional discrimination or stereotyping.

Microaggressions: subtle, often unintentional actions or comments that convey negative or harmful messages to people from marginalised groups. They can be verbal or non-verbal and often stem from unconscious bias.

Activity - True or False?

- Cultural competence is the same as cultural awareness.
- Everyone has biases, and acknowledging them makes you a bad person.
- Microaggressions are always intentional acts of discrimination.

Discuss in pairs and then share your thoughts with the group.

Developing Cultural Competency

Having identified some of the challenges that may stand in the way of cultural competency, how can these challenges be effectively addressed?

What tools and resources can help us become more self-aware; shift our attitudes, and acquire the knowledge and skills needed to achieve true cultural competence?

Self-Awareness & Cultural Humility

Self-awareness:

The ability to recognise your own cultural conditioning, privileges and biases. Understanding yourself opens the door to empathy and responsiveness to others.

Cultural humility:

A lifelong practice of self-reflection and self-critique combined with a willingness to learn from others. It means entering relationships with respect for others' beliefs, customs and values.



Reflection activity: List three cultural assumptions you hold about others. Question where they come from and how they might affect your interactions.

Active Listening & Communication



Active listening means being fully present with the speaker. Key strategies include:

- Actively focusing on the speaker and paying attention to their words, tone, inflections, and emphasis throughout their speech.
- Observe non-verbal cues such as tone, facial expressions and posture.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage sharing.
- Paraphrase to check understanding and show empathy.
- Listen to understand, not to respond, and withhold judgment.
- **“Need to know” rule** – Only ask questions that are essential to the task at hand. For example, when enrolling a student, understanding their current situation is relevant, but details about their journey to Australia are generally not necessary.

Reflect and Assess

- What attitudes could you be conveying?
- Are you reacting or responding?
- Is your attitude person-centered and aligned with the person's situation and needs?
- Are you consistently and authentically striving for continuous improvement in your self-awareness, attitude, and practice?

Continuous Learning and Development

Achieving cultural competence is an ongoing journey.

To continue learning:

- Engage in self-education: read books, watch documentaries and follow credible media from diverse voices.
- Participate in training workshops, conferences and community events on cultural awareness, trauma-informed practice and active listening.
- Collaborate with colleagues to practice and reflect on cultural scenarios.
- Advocate within your organisation for culturally responsive policies and ongoing training.

Activity: Identify two resources or events you will explore over the next month to expand your cultural knowledge.

Case Study & Reflection

Scenario:

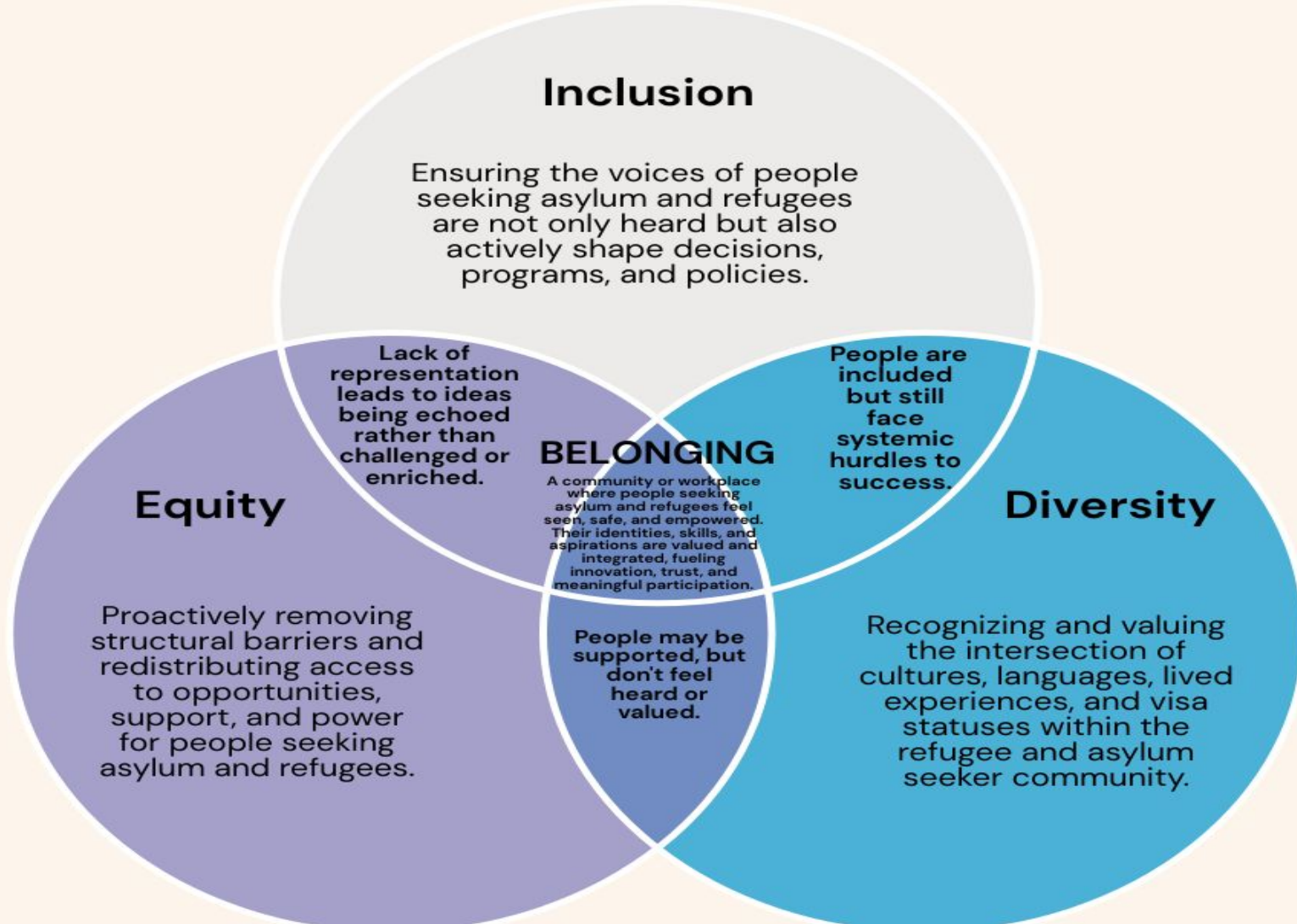
During student enrolment, a staff member enthusiastically asks a person seeking asylum about why they left their country and about their journey to Australia. The student looks down and becomes quiet.

Questions:

- What might be occurring here?
- How could the staff member apply cultural humility and active listening to respond more appropriately?
- What questions are necessary ('need to know') when supporting people seeking asylum?

Reflect individually, then discuss your thoughts with the group.

Diversity Equity & Inclusion



DE&I and Cultural Competence

Diversity: Representation of different ages, races, ethnicities, abilities, genders, religions, cultures and orientations; includes varied backgrounds, experiences, skills and expertise.

Equity: Ensures fair treatment, access, opportunity and advancement by identifying and removing barriers, promoting justice and impartiality.

Inclusion: Builds a welcoming culture where everyone feels valued and invited to contribute; embraces differences and supports participation.

Cultural Competence: Bridges diversity and inclusion by helping individuals understand, appreciate and integrate unique perspectives. It transforms representation into innovation, collaboration and success.

Reflect: Which DEI element resonates with you?

How could cultural competence support DEI?

Conclusion

In Summary:

- Cultural competence is a developmental process requiring awareness, attitude, knowledge and skills.
- Unconscious and conscious biases shape our interactions; recognising them helps reduce microaggressions.
- Self-awareness, cultural humility and active listening underpin respectful communication.
- Continuous learning and organisational support sustain inclusive practices.

Commit to continuous reflection and action – change begins with you!

Key Resources and Links

- [1] FECCA: Cultural Competence in Australia – Guide
- [2] CCPEP: Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency
- [3] Leadership Centre: Becoming Culturally Competent
- [4] BCT Partners – Components of cultural competence
- [5] Georgetown University – Cross et al. definition & essential elements
- [6] NEA – Implicit vs explicit bias
- [7] Medical News Today – Microaggressions definition
- [8] University of Oregon – Cultural humility
- [9] Verywell Mind – Active listening techniques
- [10] TechTarget – DEI definition & representation of diverse groups
- [11] Training Industry – Cultural competence bridges diversity & inclusion
- [12] Cartus – Successful DEI initiatives evidenced by intercultural competence



Thank you!

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