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# 'Cultural Competence is for Everyone': Cultural Competence in the United States Library and Information Sector. Is It Relevant to Australian Libraries?

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Cultural competence is a capacity that enables professionals and organisations to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. It has been adopted in fields such as health, social work, psychology, education and information. Library and information science in the USA has responded to growing diversity in the population by incorporating cultural competence into policy, education and practice. This article traces how this has occurred, likening the process to a learning cycle or virtuous circle. Similarities in the Australian context suggest that Australian libraries could usefully develop cultural competence by drawing on experience in the USA, to underpin the formation of a virtuous learning circle in this country.

**Keywords:** cultural competence; libraries; education; policy; library services; diversity; culture; United States; Australia

## 1. Introduction

This article discusses the emergence and application of cultural competence in US library and information science (LIS), as documented in scholarly literature; and raises the possibility of its relevance to Australian libraries. The review of selected US literature is the primary focus of the article. It describes how the library industry in the USA has incorporated cultural competence into policy, education and practice; and discusses the literature by scholars and practitioners about education and practice initiatives. The impetus for this activity in the USA has three sources: appropriate services for minority groups; the changing demographic profile of the population, which is becoming increasingly diverse; and the lack of diversity in the LIS workforce.

Consideration of the relevance of cultural competence in Australian libraries comprises a brief description of diversity in the Australian population, Australian library educators and practitioners' responses to diversity, and a short discussion of how cultural competence might be applied in this country.

The cornerstone to the literature review is Overall's cultural competence framework for LIS professionals (2009). The framework is a 'simple but excellent foundation for understanding' (Andrade & Rivera, 2011, p. 699) and has been a reference point for research (Mestre, 2010; Overall, 2010; Subramaniam et al., 2012), doctoral work (Garrison, 2013), and organisational development (Andrade & Rivera, 2011; Montague, 2013; Rivera, 2013). Engagement in the debate has come from librarians across all sectors – public (e.g., Elturk, 2000; Gomez, 2000), health (Mi, 2005; Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005), academic including law (Kreitz, 2008; Smith, 2008 as cited in Gabriel, 2013), schools

(Harris, 2014) and library and information science educators (e.g. Overall, 2009; Mehra, Olson, Hope, & Ahmed, 2011; Mestre 2010; Overall, 2010; Overall & Littletree, 2010). These conclusions of the research endorse the need to work cross-culturally and discuss implementation of cultural competence. A learning cycle or 'virtuous circle' has begun, and is evident in the discussion by outcomes, learning and reflection beneficially informing ongoing implementation.

Cultural competence, as it conceived in the US library profession, is applicable to the full range of organisational activity: recruitment and retention of staff, collection development, service provision, programming and advocacy. Jaeger et al. (2011) and Wheeler (2005) considered that adapting organisations to an environment encompassing social diversity is as important for twenty-first century libraries as embracing technology and social media.

The extent to which US libraries have achieved cultural competence draws some criticism. The bases of this criticism include whether attempts to achieve it have been genuine (Berry 1999; Mehra et al., 2011); whether issues of race, racism and privilege have been sufficiently addressed (Honma, 2005; Pawley, 2006); and the difficulty of teaching it (Mehra et al., 2011; Mestre, 2010). Practitioners are still seeking and assessing strategies for implementation. For example, Ramsey (2013a) suggests the 'multicultural efficacy scale' (Guyton & Wesche, 2005), which bears resemblances to Overall's (2009) conceptual framework.

The Australian population is also diverse, and the Australian library workforce is homogenous – white, female, middle class and educated (Hallam, 2007; Partridge et al., 2012). That Australian libraries are motivated to respond to a diverse population is evident in the Australian Library and Information Association's (ALIA) policy and guidelines, developments in education, and initiatives documented by practitioners in scholarly literature. There is to date no discussion in Australian library and information literature about cultural competence.

The debate in the USA about appropriate library services for diverse communities has used a number of terms, discussed various practice responses, and drawn on initiatives from other service industries to develop theory and practice. The many components of the US debate will not be detailed in this article as the focus is on cultural competence. The development of the concept in other service industries that incorporate it into professional education and practice will also not be included in this discussion.

## 2.  Definitions

Three concepts are central to this discussion, namely, culture, diversity and cultural competence.

### 2.1  Culture

Definitions of cultural competence include recognising the significance of culture in one's own life. To do this, it is necessary to understand what culture is to be able to do this. Rosaldo (1989, as cited in Overall, 2009, p. 3) describes culture as 'the shared daily activity of groups and organisations'. This simple description nevertheless opens up the scope of culture beyond more usual understandings that link it primarily to ethnic or religious affiliation. Culture can be expressed with family, friends and colleagues in ethnic, religious, social, recreational, economic and work contexts. These multiple situations in an individual's life mean that he or she participates in many cultures.

With this perspective, the environment within which the librarian works becomes of itself rich and complex. The environment itself, rather than the presence of discrete groups, requires capacities and attributes other than technical skills, knowledge of library systems, and reliance on the 'perceived superiority of established practice' (Overall, 2009).

## 2.2   *Diversity*

Discussing diverse communities in a LIS context, Jaeger et al. (2011) call for an understanding of diversity that draws on the definition of culture used above and which is:

> ... large enough to include legally protected populations based on race, ethnicity, gender and disability as well as populations with access challenges related to literacy, poverty, language, sexual orientation and age. (p. 167)

Such a broad understanding of what constitutes diversity will enable libraries to provide inclusive services. Therefore,

> ... meeting the challenge of information diversity means addressing race, gender, ethnicity, language, literacy, disability, age, socio-economic status, technology access and skill. (2012 Symposium on Diversity and Library & Information Science, 2013, p. 202)

The requirement for capacities and aptitudes beyond technical skill and facility with established library systems and practice is clear. Gomez (2000) described weeding a foreign language collection by drawing on the knowledge of a speaker who was not library trained and discusses the need for flexibility in library systems, for example, in being able to purchase outside the outsourced contract arrangements that many libraries currently rely on for collection development.

## 2.3   *Cultural competence*

Cultural competence can be simply described as the ability to understand the needs and norms of populations different from one's own (Kumasi & Hill, 2013). In a library context, this translates to negotiating differences between a group's norms and library service operations, such as adapting customer service to accommodate groups' differing ways of constructing knowledge; seeking information and learning; and incorporating other groups' norms, stories and celebrations into programming.

More complex definitions, which identify the components in this competency and a process for its development and application, enable the negotiation of difference and modification of approach. These more complex definitions locate the competence within the profession and the organisation (Overall, 2009; Cross et al., 1989, as cited in Kumasi & Hill, 2013).

Overall (2009) proposes a definition drawn from theory developed by other service industries that have embraced cultural competence as essential to effective service provision. In this definition cultural competence is:

> ... the ability to recognise the significance of culture in one's own life and in the lives of others; to come to know and respect diverse cultural backgrounds and characteristics through interaction with individuals from diverse linguistic, cultural and socio-economic groups; and to fully integrate the culture of diverse groups into service work and institutions in order to enhance the lives of those being serviced by the library profession and those engaged in service. (2009, p. 176)

Adopting a more organisational perspective, Cross et al. (1989, as cited in Kumasi & Hill, 2013, p. 3) define cultural competence as:

> . . . a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

In the framework provided by the definitions of diversity and culture used in this article, cultural competence has application to all groups in a library's community, in addition to those which are ethnically or religiously distinct. These definitions of cultural competence progress from a succinct explanation to an understanding of the process and elements to its acquisition and implementation. Kumasi and Hill (2013) define the kernel of the competency, Overall (2009) conveys the complexity of the process for the professional and the organisation, and Cross et al. (as cited in Kumasi & Hill, 2013) further describe the organisational outcomes.

## 3.  Select literature review

### 3.1  *Origins of cultural competence in US library and information science*

The theory of cultural competence was developed during the 1980s and adopted in health, social work, psychology and education (Overall, 2009). Nurses, for example, recognised that care outcomes could be compromised by culturally based misunderstandings and misinterpretations in communication; and that systemic barriers impeded effective cross-cultural care (Abrums, Resnick, & Irving, 2010). It is social work theory that underpins Overall's (2009) conceptual framework for library and information professionals.

The term emerged in US LIS in the 1990s, in a debate about services for minority groups that had begun in the 1960s, during the civil rights movement (Mestre, 2010). The debate during the 1990s considered services for Latinos (Elturk, 2000; Gomez, 2000) but has broadened from specific services for specific groups, to recruitment and retention of minority staff, to effective cross-cultural provision by all staff (Ramsey, 2013a).

Cross-cultural communication, multicultural, affirmative action, education, leadership, cultural awareness, intercultural leadership, cultural competence and, most recently, diversity are all the terms used in the debate. These terms are not synonymous; they encompass interactions (e.g. cross-cultural communication), knowledge (cross-cultural awareness), strategies (e.g. affirmative action), actions and capacities (cultural competence, leadership, intercultural leadership), and characteristics (multicultural, diversity). Using them interchangeably can obscure the characteristics of each term, including the specific nature of cultural competence (Kumasi & Hill 2013). The range of terms and their varying nature is an indication of the breadth of the debate and the effort required to accurately describe the issue and begin to address it.

The current focus on diversity and detailed attention to the demographic context in which librarians are working may suggest that defining cultural competence is incomplete or at least an ongoing activity. Alternatively, the focus on diversity may suggest that the debate is turning away from the profound effect of library history and philosophical principles on current services (Honma, 2005; Pawley, 2006). Honma and Pawley both identify the fundamental effect of race, racism and white privilege in the development of library services in the USA, and expose their continuing presence. Pawley (2006) suggests that the use of the term 'diversity' constitutes an avoidance of issues that are difficult for the library profession to acknowledge and grapple with.

In an example of theoretical emergence, convergence and alignment within paradigms (Glazier, as cited by Powell and Connaway, 2010), cultural competence has become incorporated into policy, education and practice. It offers an avenue for librarians of colour to exercise the leadership for which some consider they are particularly suited, by virtue of

their experience as members of minority groups (Alire, 2001). Mestre (2010) suggests that cultural competence offers a benefit to all library staff. Ramsey (2013a) argues that recruiting sufficient minority staff to meet the needs of minority groups in the population is unrealistic, as it is unlikely that enough staff could be found in minority group populations to cover all library services; it is also unrealistic that library workforces could expand to employ sufficient staff from all the groups within a community. A much more effective strategy is therefore staff and organisational development in cultural competence.

The trajectory of discussion about cultural competence approximates Kolb's learning cycle: conceptualising, principles into practice, experience and reflection (as cited in Fox, Green, & Martin 2007). For example, the 'conceptualising' phase is represented by initial debate about services for minority communities. In the 'principles into practice' phase, practitioners devised solutions (e.g. Allard, Mehra, & Qayyum 2007; Gomez, 2000; Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005), and the American Library Association (ALA) established initiatives to embed diversity awareness in education and policy. The 'experience' phase is marked by theoretical formation (Overall's conceptual framework, 2009), which then informed practice, curriculum reform (Andrade & Rivera, 2011; Overall & Littletree, 2010), service and organisational development (Mi, 2005; Montague, 2013; Rivera, 2013). 'Reflection' engendered research into the effectiveness of education outcomes (Kumasi & Franklin Hill, 2011; Mestre, 2010), practice (Kumasi & Franklin Hill, 2011; Mestre, 2010) and further improvements to implementation (Jaeger et al., 2011; Subramaniam et al., 2012).

The literature demonstrates that the learning cycle has not been strictly sequential, nor is it complete. Contributions about race, whiteness and the historic role of the public library in American society continued the 'conceptualising' phase, while 'principles into practice' was occurring. Ongoing discussion about applying cultural competence and about the nature of diversity in a LIS context suggests that 'reflection' is leading back to further conceptualisation and the identification of new issues.

Jaeger and Franklin (2007) propose that meeting the need for greater diversity in LIS faculty will create a 'virtuous circle', a cycle where the result of each event will increase the beneficial effect of the next. That is, diversity in LIS faculties will encourage both the recruitment and retention of students from minority groups and the delivery of inclusive library services; this will then result in students from minority backgrounds being more likely to enrol in LIS courses and improved use of libraries by a broader segment of the community. A 'virtuous circle' might also be perceived in the debate about cultural competence. Initial discussion about services for minority groups led to: initiatives for recruiting and retaining staff from such groups; ways of developing collections and delivering services for diverse populations, initiatives in policy and education; a broader understanding of the term 'diversity' and the role of libraries in diverse communities; and renewed attention to development for all staff.

Other external factors are contributing to the learning cycle, or the virtuous circle. The demographic profile of the US population is changing significantly. Minority groups have become the majority in some parts of the country; and whites are likely to form less than 50% of the US population by 2060 (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Practitioners also argue that library services and the library workforce are not evolving to reflect the changing demographic profiles of the communities in which they are located (Allard, Mehra, & Qayyum, 2007; Berry, 1999). Others point out that with increasing diversity in populations, the need to evolve services and develop staff is becoming imperative (Jaeger et al., 2011; Mestre, 2010; Overall, 2009).

While originally confined to the USA, discussion about cultural competence is occurring in international forums, such as the 2013 International Federation of Library

Associations Conference (Garrison, 2013; Montague, 2013; Rivera, 2013). However, the US practitioners and theorists remain prominent.

### 3.2   *How is cultural competence acquired?*

Cultural competence is described by Overall (2009) as a capacity (rather than a set of defined behaviours or skills) acquired in three overlapping domains: cognitive, interpersonal and environmental. In the cognitive domain, the individual or organisation undertakes the challenging process of recognising their own culturally formed behaviour biases and ways of learning. In the interpersonal domain, individuals and organisations learn about the cultures of those with whom they work (colleagues and clients) and adapt approaches to differences between conventional library practice and a community group's approach to information seeking and use. In the environmental domain, physical and operational features that shape or inhibit cultural expression are identified, and changes are implemented.

Overall (2009) describes a continuum of competence, moving from incompetence through incremental stages of competence to proficiency. This continuum illustrates the development of attributes and dispositions that motivate individuals to seek out cultural knowledge to improve services in diverse communities. The process is constant and intentional (Andrade and Rivera 2011), as 'cultural competence does not end with knowledge about diverse cultures. It begins a lifelong process of learning about cultural differences' (Overall, 2009, p. 197). Press and Diggs-Hobson (2005) note that it is almost impossible to know everything about every culture present in a community, so a process that can be frequently, even constantly, repeated will enable the practitioner to continue to provide appropriate services.

Multicultural education practice offers another formulation of the elements of cultural competence: knowledge, understanding, attitude and skill (Guyton & Wesche, 2005). In a library services context, awareness of the history, culture and values of major groups in a community and an understanding of cultural pluralism would constitute 'knowledge', which library staff would bring to bear on collection acquisition, service and programme design. Acquiring this knowledge is an active undertaking, requiring library staff to interact with community members and activities in addition to using formal sources of information such as census data or community profiles. 'Understanding' forms through such cross-cultural interactions and immersion experiences. Staff learn, for example, how knowledge is managed and imparted in the specific cultures within a community, and insight is gained into how members of a particular group are constrained or encouraged to gain information in an environment different from their cultural norm. 'Attitude' drives awareness of personal prejudices and biases and attempts to mitigate or change them. Finally, 'skill' draws on all three elements to implement appropriate practice (Ramsey 2013b).

There are strong similarities between the work of Overall (2009) and Guyton and Wesche (2005), which is explicated in a library context by Ramsey (2013b). Knowledge and attitude approximate the process and learning in Overall's cognitive domain; understanding equates to the processes occurring in the interpersonal; and knowledge and skill in the environmental domain.

Guyton and Wesche (2005) also identify a number of stages in a 'multicultural efficacy scale', along which effective multicultural teaching activity occurs, much like the incompetence-to-competence continuum used by Overall (2009). While Overall's framework is described as 'the most relevant and in-depth scholarship on cultural

competence in the context of LIS' (Kumasi & Hill, 2013, p. 253), Guyton and Wesche (2005) offer a similar but succinct approach to becoming culturally competent that may suit some practitioners better.

### 3.3   Why is cultural competence relevant to an LIS?

As Wheeler (2005, p. 181) states 'Twenty-first century librarians must possess a level of cultural competence that enables them to … provide effective information services within a racially and culturally diverse society'. Increasing diversity in the US population, which is not being mirrored in the LIS workforce, compels the requirement for culturally competent practice. When 'diversity' includes all disadvantaged, underrepresented and underserved groups as well as those experiencing discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, age and disability, cultural competence remains useful (Jaeger et al., 2011). Harris (2014) suggests that it is also useful where the difference between patron and professional is generational, such as in school libraries.

Benefits also extend beyond service provision to overall organisational performance. Libraries in any sector should apply cultural competence in all areas of operations – collection development, recruitment, professional development, organisational policies, access and outreach (Overall, 2009). Kim and Sin (2008) argue that provision of information services will then improve as will library performance overall. Helton (2010) argue that culturally competent organisations will achieve greater efficiency, a better fit between collections and users, more effective reference work and better use of library tools and systems. Increasing diversity introduces more perspectives into decision-making, administration and library services, resulting in an environment that is open, receptive and supportive of all employees (Andrade & Rivera, 2011). McPhatter (2004) asserts that 'cultural competence is for everyone'.

Lacking such competence carries risks. A mono-cultural environment, suggested by arrangement of collections that follow Western systems, staff appearing to belong to one group, or programming celebrating the festivals and stories of one cultural group, may deter potential users not of that group from using the library. They may perceive a lack of respect or lack of a place. Decreased patronage may also occur if staff do not understand the effect of culture on library use, for example, whether it is safe for community members to use the library, whether they will find culturally appropriate information and resources, whether they will find staff who are able to provide service that accommodates culturally mediated ways of seeking information and learning (Abdullahi, 2008). Lack of knowledge of the languages and cultural frameworks of the groups present in a community will mean inadequate library services for minority groups and a consequent lack of support for the library in its community (Mestre, 2010).

Mi (2005) states that cultural beliefs, norms and behaviours define an individual's response to and identification of the features of a situation, such as illness. In this case, health information and health information services not structured to respond to cultural beliefs and frameworks will affect the quality, safety and satisfaction of the service clients receive. Cross-cultural communication relies on an understanding of the cultures present in an interaction. Lack of this understanding can mean a failure to communicate, resulting in 'mismatched' reference interactions and instruction, where participants of different cultures misinterpret each other and information is not conveyed effectively or accurately.

Professional and organisational consequences of lacking cultural competence include poor motivation, manifested, for example, in staff actively avoiding resource selection for

minority groups, and loss of clientele (Garrison, 2013); loss of staff opportunity to learn; and isolation and stress for those who are competent or responsible for services for minority groups (Mestre, 2010).

The consensus is that cultural competence has application and benefit across the entire library sector:

> Every librarian will no doubt be working with other cultures, no matter which library or position he or she is in … Any librarian who comes in contact with another individual, either face to face or virtually, can benefit from learning about other cultures, norms, expectations, and communication styles (Mestre, 2010, p. 486).

### 3.4    *Implementation of cultural competence in the USA*

Cultural competence has been incorporated into US library policy, education and practice.

#### 3.4.1    *Policy*

The ALA plays a key role in building cultural competence into LIS education and practice. Responding to the challenges of diversity as articulated by the profession, the ALA established the Spectrum Scholarship Program in 1997. This programme addresses under-representation in the workforce and the recruitment of librarians from minority groups. In 2007, the ALA Office for Diversity was established to foster diversity as a value for the profession and a key action area of the Association. Cultural competence was incorporated into the 2008 ALA Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies (Andrade & Rivera, 2011).

#### 3.4.2    *Education*

Following the efforts of practitioners to address services for specific minority groups, and the initiatives implemented by ALA, the role of education has become prominent. The rationale for establishing cultural competence in curriculum and faculty has many benefits. Further, implementation across the organisation and within its administrative context, such as the campus of a library university, is considered necessary for competence to be truly achieved.

Incorporating cultural competence into LIS education will foster an environment reflecting the values and concerns of people from more groups than the dominant one and therefore attract student diversity (Andrade & Rivera, 2011; Jaeger & Franklin, 2007; Rivera, 2013). It will also enhance students' intellectual development, reduce prejudice and encourage exploration of diverse perspectives (Kim & Sin, 2008). Suggested strategies for increasing faculty and student diversity include incorporating critical and race theory in curriculum and service learning; and courses that address diversity *and* information and technology issues (Jaeger et al., 2011). Knowledge River, a programme to train and retain Latino and Native American professionals, demonstrates that curriculum reform and student support while studying and into employment will contribute to student and workforce diversity (Overall & Littletree, 2010).

Key discussion points in relation to LIS education include whether cultural competence should be incorporated into every course or the content of dedicated courses, and whether dedicated courses should be compulsory. Recent conclusions are that cultural competence should be a component of all courses (Andrade & Rivera, 2011; Jaeger et al., 2011;

Mestre, 2010; Montague, 2013) 'so that students who do not self-select [dedicated] courses will still be exposed to important concepts' (Garrison, 2013, p. 16).

Teaching cultural competence effectively is difficult. In a survey of cultural competence learning, students rated their increased knowledge as only moderate, although all considered acquiring cultural competence important (Kumasi & Franklin Hill, 2011). Nevertheless, the importance of providing cultural competence training is highlighted by the results of a study conducted by Mestre (2010). In a survey of librarians responsible for providing 'diversity services' but generally untrained for the responsibility, respondents indicated that they were often unsure about how to approach their work and daunted by the scope of tasks involved in developing services, collections and the necessary skills throughout their organisations. The University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science employs curriculum, whole-of-school, faculty and campus approaches to cultural competency education. The aim is to train all LIS students in cultural competence, support students from minority groups, create a culturally responsive environment and advocate within the larger institution. Strategies include collaborative efforts to increase student diversity, advocacy, recognising best practice in the field, addressing the 'whiteness' of campus structures and staff and curriculum design (Montague, 2013).

### 3.4.2   *Library services*

The social, linguistic and cultural characteristics of a library's community should inform the provision of equitable services, necessitating libraries to modify practice (Gomez, 2000) and 'build on cultural values and norms of the community, rather than replace them' (Overall, 2009, p. 10). Accessible services will enable people to seek answers to culturally familiar ways. Libraries will become 'mirrors and windows', places where people can find themselves reflected and find the answers to their questions (Davis & Hall 2007, as cited in Rivera, 2013). Services may be provided outside the library walls, 'where people are', and devised in collaboration with community leaders, creating a service defined more by the community than librarians (Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005, p. 397).

There are a number of obstacles to achieving these kinds of services. The way LIS constructs knowledge and provides information is inaccessible to groups who seek information and learn differently (Kumasi & Hill, 2011). Explaining Boolean logic to someone whose culture is unfamiliar with western mathematical concepts, for example, will probably be difficult for librarians who rely on Venn diagrams to demonstrate how the logic works (Press & Diggs-Hobson, 2005). Instead of building on a community's cultural assets, LIS initiatives to address diversity can instead be about 'improving the lives of underserved populations … [who] are often approached from a deficit perspective, e.g. lacking language, education or literacy' (Overall, 2009, p. 4).

Culturally competent best practice means respecting culture and changing library approaches that interfere with the cultural norms of a group (Overall, 2009). The intercultural toolkit offered by Allard, Mehra, & Qayyum (2007) describes a range of strategies and actions by which librarians may offer appropriate services for a multicultural population, noting that the challenges of crossing cultural boundaries apply to all interactions with all groups in a multicultural population. The five tools in the kit comprise:

- identifying culture and its characteristics;
- identifying cultural communication styles;

- recognising who and what might be marginalised or overlooked in an established information structure or in an interaction between a person working within that infrastructure and someone not part of it;
- mechanisms for organising and supplying information that accommodate cultural influences of the client; and
- mechanisms for mitigating the cultural influences within the source of information.

Allard, Mehra, and Qayyum (2007) nominate the Dewey Decimal Classification as an example of an arrangement of knowledge built on a particular set of cultural assumptions, which overlooks or discounts the knowledge and languages of other cultures. They suggest that a librarian's awareness of their lived experience of culture is the starting point for using the intercultural toolkit to navigate around the assumptions implicit in existing library structures. This starting point accords with the ability to recognise the function of culture in one's own life in Overall (2009) definition of cultural competence.

### 3.4.3   Technology

The twenty-first century library must be as culturally competent as it is technologically competent (Rivera, 2013; Wheeler, 2005). Failing to provide inclusive services for diverse populations is a greater threat to the viability of libraries than failing to embrace emerging technologies; such a failure would undermine libraries' status as trusted public places (Jaeger et al., 2011). Further, the assumption that web-based provision is culture-neutral has the potential to inhibit use and diverse modes of expression. Web-based provision and instruction run the same risks of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, which mono-cultural approaches in a physical setting do, particularly as cues that might signal miscommunication, which are visible in a physical setting, are absent online (Overall, 2010).

### 3.4.4   Organisational development

Mestre (2010), drawing from the National Center for Cultural Competence, lists the characteristics of a culturally competent organisation:

- exhibit values, principles, policies and behaviours that enable effective cross-cultural operation;
- value diversity;
- evaluate their performance; and
- negotiate difference successfully and adapt to the cultural context of their communities.

Cultural competence in a library context will improve the climate for diversity, enhance staff retention and improve services (Rivera, 2013).

Careful planning, systemic approaches and commitment are required as recruitment and retention can be hampered if minority staff encounter a library environment that does not encourage their participation or value their contributions. Respondents to Mestre's survey (2010), whether from a minority background or not, reported isolation and a sense of underachievement if working in institutions that relied on individual positions to cover the needs of diverse groups, rather than taking an organisational approach. Strategies for building diversity include involving staff of colour as role models, recruiters and mentors; and targeted work experience and practicums for school and tertiary students (Kim & Sin, 2008; Overall, 2010).

## 3.5    *Summary of cultural competence in US LIS*

Despite the initiatives outlined above, some authors consider that US LIS has not yet achieved cultural competence (Berry, 1999; Jaeger et al., 2011). A range of possible reasons for this apparent failure are nominated by Honma (2005) and Pawley (2006) who point to the historical role of libraries, particularly public libraries in the early twentieth century, as assimilationist rather than inclusive. They also argue that systems of white privilege are deeply entrenched in libraries and affect the responsiveness of libraries to diverse communities, a view the following authors also share. Helton (2010) argues that members of the dominant culture, which includes most librarians, are less likely to realise the invisible privilege they experience, a privilege that also makes them much less likely to pay attention to the cultures of others. Overall identifies a 'presumed superiority of practice' that militates against modifying approaches to diversity and instead encourages a deficit perspective on minority groups (2009, p. 8).

Complacency is also suggested as a factor preventing US LIS from achieving cultural competence. Ironically, complacency may arise from belief and commitment to the principles underpinning library mission and practice (Lankes, 2011), an attitude that may undermine achievement of those very principles and obstruct the adoption of new approaches and adaption of existing services and practice. This inertia has been the subject of increasingly trenchant comment for some time. In 1999, Berry asserted that:

> ... our otherwise enlightened profession takes little truly affirmative action to develop in its members the genuine cultural competency to make serving all Americans, not just the white middle class, commonplace .... (p. 14)

A respondent to a 2010 survey of LIS educators about perceptions of diversity in courses taught online stated:

> LIS is hostile to people from under-represented groups because it is so busy patting itself on the back for defending intellectual freedom, it is left completely unable to detect its own ideology. (Mehra et al., 2011, p. 46)

These responses demonstrate the nature of the challenge and its persistence over time. They do not indicate a failure of the concept but rather a shortcoming in its implementation and the existence of significant obstacles. These judgements, and the difficulty of effectively teaching the concept, indicate the necessity of a deliberate approach to incorporating cultural competence into policy, education and practice. It is perhaps implicit in these judgements that focussing on diversity, on the composition of diverse communities and the library workforce, will not address some of the problems inhibiting the delivery of effective cross-cultural services.

## 4.    The Australian context

The Australian population is also diverse, and the Australian LIS workforce homogenous – white, female, middle class and educated (Hallam, 2007; Partridge et al., 2012). That Australian libraries are motivated to respond to a diverse population is evident in ALIA policy and guidelines, developments in education and initiatives documented by practitioners in scholarly literature and the Association's magazine. There is to date, however, no discussion of cultural competence in Australian library and information literature.

The following sections are overviews of three aspects of the Australian context: the population, the library and information workforce, and library and information responses to diversity. A brief discussion of the potential relevance of cultural competence follows.

### 4.1 The Australian population

The variety of languages, religions, ancestries and birthplaces reported in the 2011 Census reflect a diverse society. A total of 26% population was born overseas, coming from Europe (1.394 million), Asia (915,600), the Pacific (654,600) and 'elsewhere'; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise 2.5% of the Australian population (2.329 million) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a). Data about ancestry, defined as the cultural group with which respondents most closely identified, reveal just one aspect of Australia's diversity. Census respondents could nominate a maximum of two ancestries and 300 were identified. Approximately 64% population identified their country of origin, their parents' country of origin or with more than one ancestry. The majority of people claiming an ancestry other than Australian were born here. Second generation Australians, including children of people who migrated early last century, are most likely to claim dual ancestry (ABS, 2012b). This demonstrates the durability of cultural identity.

Further complexity is found among those migrants who claimed ancestry other than Australian and other than the land of their birth. For example, 19% of those claiming Indian ancestry were born neither in Australia, nor in India (ABS, 2012b). The ABS limitation to two ancestries excludes those who might claim more, such as people born in Australia whose mother was born in one country and father in another. Their culture arguably includes an amalgam of Australian and their parents' birth cultures.

The 2011 Census also gathered information about religious identification and practice. The potential links between ethnic and religious affiliations hint at another layer to the diversity in Australian society. Following Rosaldo's definition of culture (1989), and Jaeger et al.'s (2011) expansive definition of diversity, it is possible to infer that Australian society actually encompasses diversity far beyond that exposed in the Census, encompassing multifarious and long-lived affiliations to many cultures of many origins.

### 4.2 Australian LIS workforce

The Australian LIS sector is highly feminised, professionally educated, ageing and predominantly Anglo-Saxon (Job Search Australia, 2006, as cited in Hallam, 2007) and 'a largely English-speaking, culturally homogenous group' (Partridge et al., 2012, p. 26). Other measures of diversity are unrecorded. Anecdotal evidence available to the author suggests that Australian LIS may be more diverse: a 2013 Libraries ACT planning day exercise found that approximately two-thirds of the Libraries ACT workforce was born overseas and the majority of this group are not Anglo-Saxon. This approximates the broader Australian population, where the single biggest group of migrants are from the UK but people from other parts of the world constitute the greater part of the migration total. Nevertheless, the diversity present in the whole Australian population is unlikely to be reflected in the LIS workforce, for numerical reasons: in the 2006 Census the library workforce (defined as anyone working in a library in any paid *or* unpaid capacity, but not including LIS educators) was approximately 0.5% of the total population (ABS, 2008).

### 4.3 An overview of Australian library and information responses to diversity

Policy, annual reports, strategy documents including Reconciliation Action Plans, course and learning outcomes in library education programmes, and some services indicate that Australian libraries are motivated to respond to diversity. This conclusion is drawn from consulting Australian library and information literature and key organisations' websites, looking for the terms 'diversity', 'diverse' and 'cultural competence'. Key organisations

comprised ALIA, national, state and territory libraries and universities offering library and information studies programmes. The responsiveness of library services was inferred from a search of scholarly databases using the same terms plus the term 'Australia'.

On the basis of this exploratory work, it would appear that organisational and educational attention to diversity is uneven; the meanings of the terms 'diverse' and 'diversity' are varied; and cultural competence is barely visible. An increased number of articles were located when the term 'social inclusion' was used to identify literature about Australian library service initiatives.

### 4.3.1   Policy

The policy documents accessed indicate a varying response to diversity. In some documents, there is no mention of diversity at all. Others focus on specific groups, for example, Indigenous people, people with a disability, culturally and linguistically diverse groups (ALIA, 2009a, 2009b, 2012); or on specific sectors. The ALIA (2009c) statement on public library services requires provision for all 'regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language, disability, geographic location, social status, economic status and educational attainment'.

All major institutions that produce annual reports acknowledge the need for collections and staffing profiles that reflect community diversity. In three organisations (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2013; National and State and Territory Libraries of Australasia, 2014; State Library of Victoria, 2010), cultural competence is proposed as a workforce development strategy to address community diversity. The State Library of New South Wales is including cultural competence in its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruitment strategy (personal communication, 8 May 2015).

There are separate policies for disability where this is a governmental requirement; one cultural diversity strategy references nationalities and languages only. These are narrow views of diversity when compared to the definition used in this article.

### 4.3.2   Education

Australian library schools' attention to diversity also appears uneven. Some of the following information is drawn from course descriptions and some from syllabus statements. Again, some programme webpages carry no reference to diversity or culture. Others indicate attention to diversity, culture, community, effective cross-cultural communication in design of specific courses and the inclusion of cultural competence in the context of a curriculum inclusive of indigenous content.

Four educators, admittedly a small number, were informally queried about how concepts mentioned above are incorporated into teaching. Responses ranged from rejection of the possibility that cultural competence was a concept present in the Australian industry at all (personal communication, March 27, 2013); individuals having their own approach but lacking clarity about the organisational context for adoption or implementation (personal communications, March 6, 2014, April 7, 2014); and a statement that cultural awareness was 'a given in most subjects', without saying how this is achieved (personal communication, May 23, 2014).

Alternative uses of the word 'diverse' are frequent, such as in reference to technology, organisational cultures or employment environments and education options available to students (Partridge et al., 2012). 'Cultural competence' does not appear in programme,

course descriptions or learning outcomes. The apparent absence of cultural competence frameworks in pedagogy mirrors the lack of discussion in Australian literature. However, it is not possible to infer from this absence that institutions or educators have a lack of awareness of cultural competence or the importance attached to it.

### 4.3.3 Library services

Searching Australian library and information literature for 'Australian libraries' and 'cultural competence' returned one result – a paper written by Blackburn (2014). Searches for 'Australian libraries' and 'multicultural' or 'diversity' returned many more results. 'Social inclusion' is a term also used in literature, with regard to services for refugees, young people and disadvantaged groups. These articles are mentioned to demonstrate that cultural competence is not a topic of discussion but attention to diversity in library services is.

## 5. Conclusion

According to the theory of cultural competence, service provision for groups with cultural backgrounds different to a provider's requires a specific ability, organisational commitment, flexibility and a willingness to adapt professional approaches and established practice. Authors further argue that 'the very existence of libraries rests on our ability to create institutions … where would-be users see their information needs and themselves reflected' (Rivera, 2013).

In the USA, the library industry has concluded that cultural competence is essential to achieving twenty-first century service provision. This conclusion is the outcome of practitioners arguing the right of minority groups to appropriate services; and diversity in the population, which is growing faster than in the LIS workforce. Responses have been industry-wide, driven by the professional association, educators and practitioners. The peak professional body has formulated policy, initiated student and staff recruitment and development programmes, and identified key actions for achievement in the industry, through the establishment of a dedicated office. Educators have reformed curriculum, devised support programmes for the recruitment and retention of minority students and begun to research the effectiveness of cultural competence teaching and learning and any nexus between service provision and the development of cultural competence. Some libraries have undertaken to achieve organisation cultural competence, incorporating collection management, professional development, recruitment and advocacy in the broader campus context. This process might be styled a virtuous learning circle, in which education has a key role.

In adopting this competence, US LIS is emulating other service industries that have recognised that delivery is mediated by culture. The benefits are better student preparation, useful frameworks for practitioners, effective responses to diversity in a technologically advanced environment and improved organisational performance. The literature suggests that undertaking provision for diverse communities without dedicated training and organisational support runs the risk of stress, isolation and failure to make best use of opportunities. Despite the effort recorded in the literature, some authors suggest that the US industry is not fully competent, locating this underachievement in systemic factors.

Australia has a diverse population, a fairly homogenous library workforce, and a library profession motivated to address diversity. Australian libraries are undertaking provision for diverse populations without the conceptual framework provided by cultural competence and consequently may run risks to sustainability and staff capacity.

The similarities between Australia and the USA, in population, library workforce, and motivation to provide inclusive services, combined with the benefits that the US experience and research have identified, suggest that cultural competence could be useful to Australian libraries. The US learning and experience could underpin an Australian virtuous learning circle, maximising the benefits of implementing cultural competence for everyone.

Starting points for this learning circle might include an assessment of library and information programmes' attention to diversity and cultural competence; the degree to which the provision for minority groups or diverse communities undertaken by Australian libraries demonstrate aspects of cultural competence; or an investigation of how US LIS initiatives might be modified for inclusion in Australian library education and practice.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Fiona Blackburn** has been working in the industry for eight years, during which time culturally competent service and organisations, and community engagement, have become professional interests. She recently completed a Master of Information Management, focussing on these concepts. Prior to working in libraries, she worked in a number of industries; librarianship is her first 'career' in that this is the first time she has had consecutive jobs in an industry. Her publications have addressed services for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and community engagement.

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