UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
ATTITUDES TOWARDS CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Report 2
Qualitative Reflections on Events and Survey Results
from the
"Surfing Diversity" Project of the University of Wollongong

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BACKGROUND

The ‘Living in Harmony’ initiative is a community based education program supported by the Federal Government to promote multiculturalism, racial tolerance and harmony among the Australian community. The Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Unit at the University of Wollongong was funded through the Living in Harmony initiative to undertake the Surfing Diversity project. A component of this project was to undertake a comprehensive survey of university students (both domestic and international), academic and general university staff, and community groups on attitudes towards multiculturalism. The results of this survey are documented in Report 1: Attitudes towards Cultural Diversity: Quantitative Survey Results for the Surfing Diversity Project of the University of Wollongong. As part of the program an information brochure on cultural pluralism was prepared based on these survey results.

A further aim of the Surfing Diversity project was to complement the quantitative survey results with qualitative follow up data. The aim of this second report is to examine these qualitative findings and establish how they complement the impressions and recommendations proposed in Report 1 of the Surfing Diversity project.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this second study were to:

i) Provide qualitative information on the reactions and recommendations regarding the Surfing Diversity program from those who participated in events and activities organised through the program, and

ii) To provide qualitative information on the reaction to the survey results as presented in the survey brochure.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The results of the four focus group discussions are covered in this report.

Seventeen people participated in the focus group discussions. These people comprised three University staff members, three community members, seven international students and three domestic students.

In relation to participants’ impressions of Surfing Diversity events – the lecture series and Viva La Gong – the following themes were identified across all focus groups:

Lecture Series: Highlighted important issues
Promoted the University’s role in encouraging cultural harmony
Emotive speakers
Increased participant knowledge

Viva La Gong: Celebrated community ‘togetherness’
Promoted integration
Captured the diversity of the community

1) Survey results indicating female staff, students and community members generally value and have more positive attitudes towards cultural diversity than men

   Themes identified across all groups:
   a) Stereotypical characteristic
   b) ‘Traditional male ‘role’ as aggressor/territorial

2) Survey results indicating domestic students appreciate, but are more uncomfortable with cultural diversity than international students

   i) Theme identified in community, staff and domestic student focus groups:
      a) Reacted with surprise: expected domestic students would be more open

   ii) Themes identified in staff focus group:
      a) Students translate cultural misconceptions from school environment to University
      b) Issues surrounding cultural pluralism not directly considered in most University courses

   iii) Themes identified in community, international and domestic student focus groups:
      a) International students wish to be valued as people themselves
      b) International students express appreciation and comfort with cultural diversity because they are an integral part of it themselves.
3) Survey results indicating older community members (51+ years) are most uncomfortable with cultural diversity, and people who reported ethnic origin as not Australian value diversity more than individuals who reported their ethnic origin as Australian:

i) Themes identified across all groups:
   a) Set in their ways
   b) Base attitudes on hearsay

ii) Theme identified in staff members and domestic student focus groups:

   Post-war social and political environments

METHODOLOGY

Participants
A total of 17 domestic and international students, University staff members and local community members participated in the focus group discussions. Of the 17 participants, seven were international students from Sweden, Venezuela, Papua New Guinea and India; three were University staff members, one from the Department of Nursing, one from the Faculty of Creative Arts and one general staff member; three were community members whose reported ethnic origin was Nigeria, France and Australia; and three were domestic students from the Student Representative Council. In terms of gender mix, two males and five females formed the international student group; one male and two females formed the staff group; three males formed the domestic student group; and one female and two males formed the community members group.

A list of prospective participants for the staff and community groups was generated from the EEO Unit, and the researcher contacted and invited people to participate in the discussion. International students were recruited from Campus East through posters and telephone contact with the Activities Organiser. Domestic students were recruited by contacting the University of Wollongong Student Representative Council who generated a list of interested participants.

Procedure
A semi-structured interview format was designed to explore the participants’ views of the various Surfing Diversity events and the survey results. Follow-up questions were asked to further explore the unique views of respondents.

Focus group discussions were arranged with interested participants. The staff and community member discussions were conducted at the Illawarra Institute for Mental Health building on the University of Wollongong campus. The domestic student discussion was conducted at the SRC office on the University campus, and the international student discussion was held at Campus East.

Focus groups are a useful tool for facilitating research as they provide the researcher with direct access to the language and concepts participants use to structure their views. Participants are also able to elaborate stories which helps researchers understand how they structure and organise their world (Hughes & Du Mont, 1993). Such understanding assists the researcher to ask better questions and develop the measures needed to study them. Moreover, focus groups can identify constructs that have been omitted from a conceptual framework but are important to a group’s experiences (Kitzinger, 1995).

All discussions were facilitated by the researcher and lasted for approximately 40 minutes. The facilitator used minimal encouragers to encourage participants to elaborate their comments. All discussions were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim.

Analysis
Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. Themes were identified and generated inductively from the raw information at the latent level, to understand the meaning of the information as it was used in the particular sentence (Boyatzis, 1998).

Paying close attention to respondents’ language requires the researcher to possess a high level of theoretical sensitivity to appreciate the gross and intricate aspects of the data and adequately perceive themes and patterns. This type of analysis was used to ensure the emergent themes were grounded in the comments of the participants so as to capture the qualitative richness of the information, and to ensure they would not be based on the preconceived ideas or biases of the researcher (Young & Ensing, 1999).

Each transcribed focus group discussion was examined in depth by the facilitator to obtain an overall understanding and then reduced into smaller units of meaning. Such units of meaning were compared with other summaries to determine
similarities or differences among the information. Patterns of information were then reviewed for development of themes. Themes that emerged in earlier discussions were used to begin the analysis in subsequent interviews to look for instances of themes already identified and to identify any new themes that might arise. New themes that emerged were compared to earlier transcripts to modify or enlighten previously elicited themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Comparisons were made between different participant comments, views and beliefs within one transcript, comparing the individuals at different points throughout the discussion (Smith et al, 1995b).

COMMUNITY MEMBERS FOCUS GROUP

Impressions of Surfing Diversity Events
The three members of the community focus group commented positively on the lecture series and Viva La Gong festival. Four themes identified across all focus groups from the transcribed data were: highlighting important issues, promoting the University’s role in encouraging cultural harmony, increased own knowledge and emotive speakers. Examples included: “The lectures were stimulating and highlighted some issues that are important and allowed the community to see that the University was trying to make headway.” “There were a lot of people from the community at the lecture, it was a good event. The Viva La Gong had good media coverage and those at home learnt something.” The theme of providing an atmosphere of togetherness was unique to this focus group and was described as follows: “The Viva La Gong brought people together in an atmosphere of fellowship. It created an atmosphere of togetherness, very relaxed and good for the broader community. Aden Ridgeway and Ronald Wilson spoke with such emotion and feeling. I learnt issues about their culture and the stolen generation.”

Reaction to Survey Results
Members commented on the gender differences that emerged where females reportedly value cultural diversity more than males. One member expressed their view by saying: “I think in most cultures, men are trained to suppress their emotions and the results may be an extension of that and affects their cultural view.” This ‘stereotypical’ view was a common theme identified among each of the focus groups. Another participant described this theme in a way unique to the group: “The male feeling may come from a threat as far as employment goes, you know the stereotypical ‘taking all our jobs’ and male workforce has been more and more forced out of the general workforce with women occupying more jobs…..that could be reflective of that and as men are starting to feel more isolated they may need to fight back.”

The participants also commented on the issue of media representation of cultural minorities, illustrated by comments such as: “I think it depends on whether it’s international, national or local representation. At the local level there is not enough representation of minorities or the impact they have. The international news focuses on war and conflict and evokes emotive images quite a lot of people would disregard to a large extent because they’ve seen it in the news for so long, they become ‘battle-hardened’ you could say.” This view of media representation was unique to this community group. One participant suggested: “People form attitudes based on what they see in the media so the media should focus on more positive issues and good things that happen in other cultures.”

Participants responded to the survey result of domestic students appreciating but being more uncomfortable with cultural diversity than international students with comments like: “I think that was quite interesting given the diverse makeup of Australia. They could be uncomfortable and challenged by it.” This survey result generated the theme of ‘surprise’ across all groups. The survey result of people who reported their ethnic origin as non-Australian seeming to value diversity more than people who said their ethnic origin was Australian evoked participant responses common to all focus groups, such as: “If you’re coming from a different culture and want to be accepted, you would value cultural diversity more because they want to be valued as people themselves.” Another participant responded by saying: “People have experience from their own country and older people tend to hold onto their own culture and background more. Young people tend to use it leisurely as they try to identify with Australia to be accepted by their friends. It depends on the situation.”

Participants responded to the result indicating that people aged 50+ years reported being the most uncomfortable with cultural diversity by saying, for example: “They have a lack of understanding of different cultures and are ignorant about them. The older generations don’t tend to ask questions about other cultures and base their feelings or conclusions on hearsay.”

UNIVERSITY STAFF MEMBERS FOCUS GROUP

Impressions of Surfing Diversity events
The University staff members that participated in the discussion had attended the Sir Ronald Wilson and Aden Ridgeway lectures, and the Viva La Gong festival. One participant expressed their opinion of the lectures by saying: “Ronald Wilson was a good speaker and has such a strong background and very emotive about Aboriginal policy.” Another said: “It was a
good mix of community and University staff and students that went ……..We were able to obtain a copy of Ronald Wilson’s speech and made contacts in the community, so it was very beneficial.” Themes common across all groups of emotive speakers, promoted integration and captured diversity of the University and the community were identified within this focus group. Another participant said: “The events made me reflect on the importance of these events. It brought people together on campus that don’t necessarily have a common basis……It made me aware there are really important people on the campus that have knowledge and expertise that the institution doesn’t draw on as much as it would or should in the manner which we constitute our decision making.”

The Viva La Gong festival gained the response: “We saw faces in the community we would not normally see, particularly of various groups with a strong ethnic representation such as the Vietnamese community. It promoted integration of various parts of the community and captured the diversity of the community, both in the socio-economic and ethnic sense.”

Reaction to Survey Results
One staff member responded to the result indicating females value cultural diversity more than males by saying: “There may be lots of potential variables that affect the responses and if we are talking about the student population of male undergraduates for example, then we are talking about people who may be less secure and more open to peer pressure. That’s the sort of thing you should answer, what are the things that influence people in responding to these surveys? I would have been surprised if the results were the reverse.”

Another focus group member discussed the educational aspect: “Perhaps male students are less interested in cultural diversity or education opportunity than females. As part of the education process, many students are not even asked to consider any of these issues. In courses such as Education, people are being asked very directly to consider these issues, so they are in the forefront rather than the background.” This statement was unique to the staff members group. One participant offered an historical view: “Much of tradition ……………the male protector of various areas and the female carer role. Maybe traditionally men have been the aggressors to an extent and that has been hard to shake off.”

Participants expressed surprise at the survey result of domestic students being more uncomfortable with cultural diversity than international students. An example includes: “I thought our students would have been far more open.” One participant offered the explanation: “Maybe it’s just the baggage students bring from school that they’ve translated into the university. In school students are directly compared on an individual basis and I find it hard to believe that the university environment fosters this because the process of admission is completely independent.” Another participant explained their interpretation of discomfort by saying: “I am a bit wary that discomfort is a negative. If I’m uncomfortable in a different cultural situation it’s because I’m sensitive to doing the right thing in terms of my behaviour. In a cultural context I’m not familiar with, I’m perfectly happy to be there, but uncomfortable because I would be working hard at trying not to do anything wrong.”

Stanley’s (1997) scale for cultural pluralism of discomfort, where people may express discomfort to people who are different from themselves, is challenged by the participant’s statement that suggests discomfort should not be necessarily perceived negatively and should be more clearly defined in terms of Stanley’s (1997) scale for cultural diversity.

The survey results of people who reported their ethnic origin as non-Australian valuing cultural diversity more than people whose ethnic origin was reported as Australian evoked the response: “They’ve already experienced cultural diversity so naturally they would appreciate and value diversity more, they are a part of it.” This statement supports the identified theme across all focus groups relating to international students valuing diversity because they are a part of it.

Participants offered historical and political reasons unique to the group as to why older people reported being the most uncomfortable with cultural diversity. Responses included: “They experienced the post-war immigration so their experiences may have been a bit hard to shake even with the best of intent in terms of personal values. I think there is a lot of baggage people carry from the wars, fighting Japanese, Asia and Europe. And the White Australia policy. It is unrealistic to think people are going to wipe that out of their lives quickly. It reflects how your attitude is affected by the political environment rather than just the home.”

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT FOCUS GROUP

Impressions of Surfing Diversity events
All international students that participated in the discussion had taken part in organising and constructing the student float in the Viva La Gong street parade. One participant described the experience: “Looking at the other communities that were there, it gave you the impression that it was celebrating living here, in Wollongong.” Another participant described their experience by saying: “International students want to integrate in the University and with people of their age, not society in general, so it was very hard to get the students involved. We had to drag them building the float but it was fun, dancing in
the streets and trying to create we are living in harmony. It was a good impression of our organisation.” This view of Viva La Gong was unique to the international students and not identified in any other focus group.

Reaction to Survey Results
The participant responses reflected their own experiences in terms of the result that domestic students reported being more uncomfortable with cultural diversity than international students. The responses were unique for the international student group, who made comments such as: “I come from a very monocultural environment and here being very diverse made me feel more comfortable, like one of the people already here. I guess we have to appreciate it because we are part of it and you don’t appreciate it as much back home.

The domestic students have the same attitude we would back home. Even though Australia is a multicultural society, you appreciate it if you study abroad rather than if you study in your own country.” Another participant said: “I just assume Australians grow up in such a multicultural society, it would not make that much of a difference, they have already seen most of it.”

Participant comments on the survey result where women reported more positive attitudes than men towards cultural diversity indicated ‘stereotypical’ explanations, a finding common across all focus groups. An example included: “I guess women are more caring and value their culture and things that are passed down from generations, women tend to get closer to family, she affects the family more and the man is generally more laid-back.”

The survey result of overseas students saying they feel they implement more activities that assist cultural diversity compared to domestic students yielded responses particular to this focus group. Responses included: “International students want to integrate so they need to do this. They want to promote their own cultural backgrounds to the University. Domestic students probably feel like the majority and don’t feel it’s necessary. International students are forced to adapt.”

Participants responded to the results that people over 50 are most uncomfortable with diversity by suggesting: “Maybe they are just set in their ways and don’t really want to make an effort.” Such an opinion was identified as being common to all focus groups.

Participants commented on the result that the older student group (41+ years) had the most positive attitudes to cultural diversity by suggesting: “Older people travel in broader cultures world wide and offer something to share with other cultures. They tend to be more open and try to share more, they are curious about our cultures. Here at Campus East, people are set up, everything we do is multicultural. I don’t think people have goals to do multicultural things, it just happens like this.”

DOMESTIC STUDENTS FOCUS GROUP

Impressions of Surfing Diversity events
The domestic students evaluated the Aden Ridgeway lecture in terms of the broader political climate. One participant said: “You know it’s actually good to have a politician have to go off their own back and not have their media advisor behind them telling them what they can or can’t say.” The participants noted enjoying the lecture, but said: “If they put what they were saying into practice it would have been a lot better.”

Reaction to Survey Results
For the survey result indicating that women appear to value cultural diversity more than men, the emergent theme in the domestic student data was that of a stereotypical characteristic. This theme was present in other focus groups as well as the domestic student group, where one participant said: “A lot of men get very territorial ………and would feel threatened.” Another participant said: “Men do not go to people for help or advice so obviously they are going to form their own opinions, and other people’s opinions don’t come into it.”

In terms of media representation of cultural minorities, the domestic student focus group were in agreement over the survey results, with one participant saying: “They do show cultural minorities in a bad light ………they blame everything on cultural minorities, the news is only there to sell itself.”

One participant noted surprise at the survey result indicating domestic students feel more uncomfortable with cultural diversity than international students by saying: “I thought the diverse makeup of the University environment would foster a lot of interest in other cultures. I was surprised about those results.” The theme identified in the international student focus group of how international students express appreciation and comfort because they are part of the diversity themselves is
supported by a statement by one of the domestic students, who said: “If you’re an international student and you go from being in the majority to the minority then I suppose it would be easier to accept cultural diversity.”

The participants responded to the survey result finding people who reported their ethnic origin as non-Australian value diversity more than those who reported their ethnic origin as Australian by offering an historical view. One participant said: “Historically we have a country that has not accepted people and it’s very hard to get away from that sort of thing, it’s throughout our history. Someone just sees a group that’s different to them.” Another participant believed society reinforces cultural misconceptions, by saying: “People don’t accept them, they are threatened. People are being taught all this stuff that isn’t true, without thinking.”

Similar to the University staff focus group, the domestic students offered a historical opinion in response to the survey result indicating that older people (51+ years) reported being the most uncomfortable with cultural diversity. One participant said: “You’d have to look at where people are coming from, you’ve still got people who remember the war and come from that war era.”

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Table 1 illustrates the recommendations made by participants for improvements to future programs such as Surfing Diversity. Participants representing the community focus group suggested: “Key things should be brought out of different cultures, relate to things like radio, TV, internet, video and educate people of cultural ways of doing things.” One participant illustrated their point by saying: “Education is the main factor ………We need to get people together and talk about it, in large groups of different people to talk about it and express opinions. You’ve got to start from school, when they’re young.” Another participant said: “Education is essential but putting words in print, by electronic media could also reach further. I don’t think any of the political groups today promote multiculturalism, they don’t focus on creating a more harmonious Australia. The politicians talk about creating a tolerant society and I believe we should be focusing on acceptance. Tolerance has negative connotations attached to it and subtle language continually reinforces that. Until the media starts changing those subtle images, they are the ones that really count, they have more effect by slowing changing people’s opinions of other people.”

Like the community members, the University staff participants emphasised the need for political leaders to play more active roles in encouraging cultural harmony. One participant said: “Our leaders need to be very public in terms of their stance and support of their issues. They have to be more outspoken, active and seen to be championing the cause. We have to be more public in terms of exposing and encouraging discussion on all those instances of the negatives, the racism and the ‘One Nation’ phenomena. That’s the shocking thing about ‘One Nation’, that it exposed many things many of us didn’t believe existed. At the surface level things may appear to be fine and it might be a small percentage of the population, but it is a significant percentage. Things must be brought to the forefront and coupled with going public about the negative aspects.”

Another participant discussed the need for the University to promote cultural harmony. “The University needs to have the image of being an open multicultural community that doesn’t tolerate intolerance and to utilise the student media to act as a mechanism to generate discussion. The Surfing Diversity events were probably not advertised widely enough. The breakfast was invitation only and people didn’t hear about it until afterwards. It’s such great branding, Surfing Diversity, but I found no web site for it, just leaflets and pamphlets. I think it needs to be more easily accessible that way. The student media could have issue-based publications and ask people to contribute, this needs to be reinforced. Maybe advertisements could be placed on sides of buses or put pamphlets in places people don’t normally go, like GP waiting rooms, focus on areas where people may have no choice but to read the contents.”

In terms of the wider community, the international student participants suggested the media could represent cultures more accurately and portray cultures like their own, focusing on ordinary, day to day things. One participant emphasised the need for education, although another said: “If you focus too much on education they will react defensively and hate what people are doing.” This participant further suggested: “They be kept exposed and in touch with people from other cultures, then this will gradually change their attitudes.”

The international students also suggested that regular organised sporting activities such as football games or cricket games could target the gender differences that emerged from the survey. Other recommendations for implementation by the University included food stalls and regular international food weeks focusing on different countries to make it more accessible for people on campus to attend. Also within the University environment, the domestic student participants suggested that programs such as Surfing Diversity should provide workshops and musical events rather than lectures to achieve a high amount of student interest and attendance. One participant also suggested that the Uni integrate aspects of
other cultures into University courses. They discussed the concept of University education, saying: “If international students are taught about Australian culture, then the University should integrate their culture into our courses so we learn to respect them.”

A further suggestion involved society focusing on what people perceive as causes of racism and to write about these cultural misconceptions. Such writings about misconceptions could be printed to combat misconceptions and media misrepresentation. Another participant suggested that society promote cultural diversity as a good thing, not as something that is to blame for everything.
**APPENDIX A**

**TABLE 1 – RECOMMENDATIONS**

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<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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| Community Members          | • Use of electronic media to educate people  
                              • Political leaders focus on promoting ‘acceptance’ rather than ‘tolerance’  
                              • Get people together regularly and discuss negative and positive issues of cultural diversity |
| University Staff Members   | • Political leaders need to be more publicly supportive of multicultural issues  
                              • University should promote image of not accepting racial intolerance  
                              • Utilise student media as mechanism to generate discussion  
                              • Surfing Diversity to advertise more widely eg: sides of buses, GP waiting rooms |
| International Students     | • Organise regular sporting activities  
                              • International “food” weeks  
                              • Keep public continually exposed and in touch with people from different cultural backgrounds  
                              • Media represent minorities by focusing on day to day issues rather than negative issues |
| Domestic Students          | • Use supporting documents to combat cultural misconceptions  
                              • Provide workshops and musical events rather than ‘lectures’ to enhance student attendance and interest  
                              • Integrate aspects of other cultures into all University courses |
REFERENCES


