



# Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia: Summary of Recommendations

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# Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia

*This Australian Research Council-funded Discovery Project [DP180100360] was conducted by Professor Carl Rhodes (UTS), Professor Alison Pullen (Macquarie University) and Dr Celina McEwen (UTS).*

A 4 year study that researched how leadership is practised in the intersection of the cultural and gender differences in Australian organisations known for their best practice in diversity and inclusion management and programs.



- Effective diversity management needs to focus on radical equality
- Diversity and inclusion management can entrench inequality
- Differences become compartmentalised and stereotyped
- Relational leadership can be positive and negative
- Intersectional relations are complex and inherently political

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ADVANCE INTERSECTIONAL EQUALITY AMONG A DIVERSE AUSTRALIAN WORKFORCE?

### FOR LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS

Advocate the moral case for diversity.

Stand against 'the way things are done around here'.

Understand the history of discrimination.

Collaborate with diversity organisations.

Map intersectional diversity in relation to hierarchy and roles.

Be a relational leader and listen to what all staff have to say.

### FOR DIVERSITY & HRM PROFESSIONALS

Deal with real issues of discrimination, oppression, misogyny, and racism.

Understand diversity as an intersectional spectrum, not a set of categories.

Tailor diversity and inclusion strategies to organisation-specific problems.

Challenge the myth of meritocracy to create equality of outcomes.

Politicise diversity and inclusion practices.

### FOR BUSINESS EDUCATORS

Embed diversity in curriculum and pedagogy.

Seek expertise in Indigenous history and in Australian multi-culturalism.

Engage students in leadership as a collective practice.

Explore how relationships foster discrimination and workplace violence.

Discuss the moral case for diversity.

Disrupt the status quo.



# Content

<b>Context and Research Approach</b>	<b>6</b>
Leadership in Australia	6
A multi-case study of Australian organisations	6
<b>Key Findings and Recommendations</b>	<b>7</b>
What gets in the way of progress?	7
How do leadership practices prevent change?	7
How to improve equity practices?	8
For Leaders	8
For Business and Management School educators	9
For diversity and inclusion and Human Resources Management (HRM) professionals	9
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>11</b>

# Context and Research Approach

'Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia' is a research project conducted between 2018 and 2021 in partnership with three Australian organisations by Professor Carl Rhodes (University of Technology Sydney), Professor Alison Pullen (Macquarie University) and Dr Celina McEwen (University of Technology Sydney).

This project would not have been possible without the participation of staff from the three Australian organisations who agreed to be part of the study. We thank participants for their generosity, interests and the confidence they placed in the project when sharing their experiences on what diversity in the workplace meant to them.

## Leadership in Australia

Australia is commonly regarded as a 'success story' for multiculturalism, with 30% of its population being born overseas<sup>1</sup>, and for developing progressive policies on issues of gender equality. Many equality measures and laws regulate our domestic and work lives. Diversity and inclusion strategies and practices have been widely implemented as equality interventions to address the imbalances borne from persistent discrimination and inequality. Despite this, there is a lack of significant progress in the diversity of public and private organisational leaders. Among senior leaders and executives, 76% are from Anglo-Celtic, and 19% are from European backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> Women comprise only 20% of senior leaders and executives and 30% of key management personnel positions.<sup>3</sup>

## A multi-case study of Australian organisations

The Australia Research Council funded 'Leadership Diversity Through Relational Intersectionality in Australia' project addressed three primary research aims:

- To assess how leadership is practised in the intersection of cultural and gender differences that characterise the relationships between leaders and followers as experienced in specific organisational contexts.
- To develop an empirically grounded and practically relevant theorisation of inclusive relational leadership.
- To advance strategies for leadership practice and education that address cultural and gender diversity.

The project focused on:

- 3 Australian small to medium public and private organisations.
- 69 key participants.
- Immersive ethnographic case studies of 4-9 months each.
- Interviews, observation and organisational documentation reviews.

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<sup>1</sup> ABS (2021). *Migration, Australia, 2019-20 financial year*. Australian Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>2</sup> Soutphommasane, T., Whitwell, G., Jordan, K., & Ivanov, P. (2018). *Leading for Change: A blueprint for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership revisited*. Australian Human Rights Commission.

<sup>3</sup> AICD, Heidrick & Struggles (2018). *Beyond 200: A study of gender diversity in ASX 201-500 companies*. Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Cassells, R., & Duncan, A. S. (2020). *Gender equity insights 2020: Delivering the business outcomes* (No. GE05). Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC), Curtin Business School.

# Key Findings and Recommendations

The project surfaced how diversity in organisations is made visible through internal and external means. Internally, diversity is managed through formal strategies and documents, informal activities and dedicated diversity and inclusion positions. Externally, diversity is demonstrated through the display of symbolic and material engagement with diversity and inclusion (e.g., public statements on same-sex marriage, customer-based multicultural programs and community guidelines) and the attainment of awards and certifications. The project also highlighted that despite changes to the workforce composition and diversity in business being promoted, celebrated and championed, many obstacles remain to expanding the diversity of the workforce.

## What gets in the way of progress?

- **Categories and hierarchies of diversity:** Organisational categories developed to manage and contain various forms of diversity that are not designed to address issues of power and intersectionality.
- **Cultural sexism in organisations:** Established cultural notions of 'mateship', loyalty to the 'in-group' and merit that reinforce masculine norms and bonds. In organisations, these norms and bonds can be strong enough to maintain barriers to the advancement of women to leadership or male-dominated roles.
- **Workplace diversity and inclusion policy-outcome gap:** A disconnection and separation between diversity and inclusion discourses and practice, individual actions and systemic consequences, and those inside and outside the circles of power in organisations.
- **Shifting of leadership accountability and responsibility:** While senior leaders may support diversity, the people who champion and manage diversity and inclusion, translating policies into action and monitoring practices, are often at risk of burnout, being made redundant or resigning.

## How do leadership practices prevent change?

- **Separation between internal and external diversity and inclusion strategies:** Organisations have different diversity and inclusion strategies and practices depending on whether they are addressing an internal or external 'audience'. Often, the internal diversity and inclusion practices are formal strategies and policies, dedicated diversity and inclusion positions and staff engagement activities developed to manage diversity within organisations. In contrast, the external strategies include public statements, community-based activities and attainment of awards and certifications to demonstrate symbolic inclusion and attempts at including people to increase the favourable profile of organisations. Although the external and internal strategies have different purposes, this separation becomes problematic when the different strategies do not inform each other and are underpinned by divergent representations of equality.
- **Challenges between status quo and change:** Professional and personal contexts are important in understanding and making sense of categories of difference and the expectations about how leadership should act on diversity. Leaders are appointed according to entrenched norms and practices. However, because they are seen as



belonging to a valued category of difference, they may be ambivalent about advocating for change, and work to maintain the status quo. Leaders who see themselves as 'diverse' may need to do self-censoring work to fit the organisation, and navigate categories and hierarchies of difference developed to manage and contain 'diversity' in their workplace.

- **The negative and positive aspects of relationality:** Inclusive relational leadership is marked by both positive (assumed to be for the greater collective/public good) and negative (assumed to be self-interest or cronyism) aspects of relationality. Loyalty to an 'in-group' takes precedence over ensuring equity of opportunities and outcomes. Combined with a shifting of accountability and responsibility from leaders down the organisation, places the onus of change on individuals who carry the burden of championing diversity and inclusion causes, translating policies into action and monitoring practices, at the risk of burnout.
- **Repressive equality regimes:** The suite of diversity and inclusion strategies and practices at work can control 'diversity' at all levels of organisations. It does so in a way that can further obfuscate, depoliticise and incapacitate them. This control occurs through the:
  1. **Mainstreaming** of diversity and inclusion practices and discourses that co-opts and dilute their potency.
  2. **Containment** of 'diverse' staff in dedicated depoliticised roles and activities that lack the power and resources to enact change.
  3. **Coercion and burdening of 'diverse' staff** into making diversity and inclusion visible and performing 'equity'.
  4. **Legitimisation** of leadership because of diversity and inclusion strategies being presented or perceived as successful in increasing equal opportunities for marginalised groups, despite failing to change the status quo.

## How to improve equity practices?

### For Leaders

To foster the equality of diverse workforces genuinely and radically at all levels of organisations and the transformative potential of diversity and inclusion practices, leaders need to:

- ➔ **Understand the historical and cultural context:** Avoid implementing 'vanilla' or 'off the shelf' solutions by taking responsibility and being accountable for change as it relates to the specific cultural conditions of the organisation and how this culture has changed over time.
- ➔ **Become an advocate:** Seek advice and/or collaborate with diversity organisations and community groups.
- ➔ **Work with and across differences:** Use personnel surveys to allow staff to identify with greater forms of difference (e.g., linguistic, age, ability, gender, ethnicity, birthplace) and to map the organisation's diversity in relation to hierarchy and roles.
- ➔ **Rethink the relationship between leaders and followers:** Be a relational leader who is open and listens to what all staff have to say, demonstrates safety for staff to interact with leaders and supports their emotional investment in the organisation.
- ➔ **Adopt an ethical democratic goal:** Consider the moral case for diversity and inclusion ahead of the business and legal cases.



- ➔ **Disrupt the status quo:** As a leader, be prepared to stand against 'the way things are done around here' in terms of one's own actions and decisions.

### **For Business and Management School educators**

To shape the current business practices in Australia and equip the future workforce of leaders and managers to tackle the grand challenge of diversity and inclusion, educators need to implement teaching and learning activities that develop leaders' capacity to:

- ➔ **Understand the historical and political context:** Embed diversity and inclusion in curriculum content and pedagogy to help future leaders understand work, management and organising as a socio-historically constructed practice. Given the Australian context, become knowledgeable, seek expertise and link to Indigenous history and struggles, and Australian multi-culturalism.
- ➔ **Work with and across differences:** Introduce greater complexity to the relationships between cultural norms and practices that sustain diversity categories of difference. Explore how relationships foster micro-aggressions, discrimination and workplace violence.
- ➔ **Rethink the relationship between leaders and followers:** Facilitate student engagement with an understanding of leadership as a relational and collective practice, rather than an individual's psychological trait, that develops and evolves according to the who, what, when and where of any given situation.
- ➔ **Adopt an ethical democratic goal:** Discuss the moral case for diversity as a core element of the curriculum and not simply as part of a one-off discussion about business ethics.
- ➔ **Disrupt the status quo:** Introduce assessment tasks that encourage students to seriously explore the benefits of business models for the greater good.

### **For diversity and inclusion and Human Resources Management (HRM) professionals**

To overcome the limits of existing diversity and inclusion strategies and practices, and move beyond advocating for the benefits of an inclusive and diverse workforce which overcomes systemic barriers, diversity and inclusion and HRM professionals are encouraged to:

- ➔ **Define diversity as a spectrum:** Replace strategies of inclusion that focus solely on staff identification with categories of difference, with strategies that provide greater opportunities for meaningful involvement and contribution at work that values difference. Conduct regular surveys to capture the organisation's range of, and changes in, diversity, and how it is understood and valued.
- ➔ **Align diversity and inclusion strategies and practices vertically and horizontally:** Tailor diversity and inclusion strategies to organisation-specific workforce demographics, identified needs, expectations and interests. Raise awareness and demonstrate how corporate social responsibility strategies are related to diversity and inclusion strategies and how they can address internal gaps in representation across roles and hierarchies.
- ➔ **Challenge the myth of meritocracy:** Frame diversity and inclusion strategies and practices as actionable, measurable, and evidence-based opportunities and outcomes for both staff and the organisation. Move away from subjective and inconsistent merit-based perceptions of their contribution to the organisation's bottom line. Replace merit-

based assessments for recruitment and promotion with assessments based on capacity and experience relative to opportunities.

- ➔ **Politicise diversity and inclusion practices:** Combine raising awareness about differences and celebrating diverse lived experiences with identifying and changing unfair or unequal practices and procedures. Regularly review and/or consult with staff to determine how the recruitment and promotion systems and procedures may benefit some people over others and how to remedy the disadvantage these structures support.

# Conclusion

Despite the difficulties experienced around diversity in the workplace, participants shared with the researchers their hopes for change, especially change driven by an evidence-based approach. Such an approach was valued as a means to help improve interpersonal relations and the broken trust, and to develop a clear vision for the organisation. More specifically, there was hope that the findings from the project would provide evidence about recurring issues, as well as how to address them.

The barriers to achieving diversity in organisations, especially in leadership positions, are significant. Assuming that a simple set of policies and practices can solve the diversity 'problem' is not only naive but contributes to the deterioration of advocating for change and internally managing diversity and inclusion. It is only by accepting the true scope of the challenge and making an embedded and long-term commitment to overcoming it that organisations can make real progress.

To advance strategies for leadership education and practice that address diversity and inclusion requires disrupting privilege in advancing fair and just workplaces. This is a primarily political rather than managerial responsibility that would transform the relationship between leaders and followers. Central to this is identifying, disrupting and replacing the 'repressive equality regimes' that can support diversity and inclusion in principle, but obscure structural inequalities in practice.

