

# **Receptivity and Readiness for Cultural Competence Training among the Human Service Professions in Hong Kong**

## **Executive Summary**

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

1. This research aimed to examine understandings of cultural competence among human service professionals (including nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers, and school teachers) in Hong Kong, identify their needs and challenges in serving culturally diverse groups, explore their willingness and receptivity to receive cultural competence training, and identify best practices for providing cultural competence training.
2. The study involved two main components: 1) a systematic literature review of local and overseas literatures and documents about the practices and education associated with cultural competence, and 2) qualitative in-depth interviews with key informants to learn about the understandings, receptivity, and readiness of Hong Kong human service professionals regarding training on cultural competence.

### **METHODS**

3. The systematic literature review analyzed various local and overseas materials, including official documents on the promotion of equal opportunities for all people regardless of cultural and ethnic background, professional codes of practice and protocols for human service professionals in serving ethnoculturally diverse populations, news reports and research reports by statutory bodies, universities, and service providers about culturally competent practice, and academic journal articles describing the implementation, training, and effectiveness of cultural competence in professional practice.
4. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 educators from local tertiary institutions providing training for the five human service professions, two representatives of trade unions and professional associations, and 31 managerial and frontline workers from human service professions.

## **RESULTS OF THE REVIEW OF DOCUMENTS AND LITERATURE**

5. In the context of this study, ethnoculturally diverse groups generally refer to people from non-Chinese backgrounds. In the context of Hong Kong, these include immigrants from other countries/cultures and their Hong Kong-born offspring, refugee claimants, and foreign workers. The literature review revealed that the proportion of non-ethnic Chinese residents has increased in recent years and, as such, it is crucial to improve the level of cultural competence within human service professions.
6. Cultural competence is an evolving process of attaining cultural knowledge (knowledge about history, values, etc. of other ethnic groups), increasing cultural awareness (respecting other cultural attitudes) and having cultural sensitivity (being aware of differences and similarities among ethnic groups and not assigning values, i.e. 'better' or 'worse', to those differences or similarities). The reviewed documents and research identified current cultural competence practices and education among nurses, therapists, social workers, and teachers in Hong Kong and abroad.

### **Local cultural competence practices and education among human service professions**

7. The literature review identified ethical principles or standards related to cultural awareness and non-discriminatory and equality measures for local nurses, social workers, and teachers, but revealed that local therapists generally lack professional guidelines in providing culturally competent services. In addition, local training is generally insufficient for students and frontline workers to carry out culturally competent services.

### **Overseas experiences in cultural competence practices and training in human service professions**

8. Materials were reviewed on cultural competence practices and training in human service professions in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, in order to understand how institutions and professions in these countries promote cultural competence. The review revealed that cultural competence is regarded as a compulsory professional standard and educational outcome in these countries. Additionally, scholars highly value the importance of cultural competence training, including a focus on its effectiveness and implications for the attitudes and values of students who will become human service professionals in the future. Recommendations include ensuring more frequent interactions between ethnoculturally diverse clients and students through multiple means, such as immersion approaches to training, in order to enhance cultural competence.

## **RESULTS OF KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS**

### **Current practices and training on cultural competence and serving culturally diverse settings**

9. Generally speaking, nurses, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists in Hong Kong are less exposed to culturally diverse service settings and have relatively fewer chances to receive cultural training compared to social workers and teachers. This is because social workers and teachers tend to spend more time working with non-Chinese clients or students, and therefore need to develop closer relationships with their service targets.
10. More precisely, nurses and physiotherapists are generally less concerned about being culturally sensitive when providing services, as compared to occupational therapists. This is because nurses and physiotherapists feel it is sufficient to fulfill their duties by following standardized procedures and protocols in hospitals when providing services for patients from all cultural backgrounds, while occupational therapists often need to engage in more personal communication with patients, including ethnoculturally diverse patients, as they need to develop and implement training activities or rehabilitation plans based on the needs of individual patients.
11. The extent of the implementation of culturally competent practice varies across professions and service areas. For example, psychiatric nurses might consider themselves more culturally sensitive than general nurses, because they need to build up rapport and maintain smooth communication with patients and their families in order to facilitate rehabilitation. Social workers affiliated with specialized units and agencies for non-Chinese groups tend to be more aware and knowledgeable of cultural issues in practice, compared to social workers in mainstream units. In short, it seems that in service domains requiring practitioners to interact more closely with patients and follow up individual cases, practitioners may be more aware of clients' cultural needs and be more proactive in supporting them with specific attitudes and approaches.
12. In terms of training on cultural competence, ethical principles of racial equality are generally touched upon in professional training curricula offered by local tertiary institutions. However, there are few specialized courses, activities, or practical training opportunities on cultural competence for students. For current practitioners, there are limited on-the-job training opportunities focused on serving ethnoculturally diverse groups, especially for local nurses and therapists. Social workers and teachers reported having more training on cultural issues and non-Chinese groups. However, both the quality and quantity of on-the-job cultural competence training are limited.

### **Needs and challenges in providing services to culturally diverse groups**

13. The majority of human service professionals, especially those who have more direct communications with service targets, often face language barriers and various forms of cultural shocks when encountering the needs and cultural norms of ethnoculturally diverse clients. In addition, few professional support resources are available for these practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of their clients' heritage and perspectives, such as norms associated with diet, gender differences, and family dynamics.

### **Human service professionals' willingness to receive training on cultural competence**

14. In general, nurses and physiotherapists report a lower willingness to receive training compared to other professionals, as cultural competence is not considered a priority issue. In addition, it seems that professionals' willingness will be stronger if they encounter more non-Chinese clients in their service settings and if their daily tasks require closer working relationships with clients (as is the case for occupational therapists, social workers, and teachers).

### **Best practices for providing cultural competence and related training**

15. Key informants suggested that for students receiving professional training in tertiary institutions, cultural competence concepts and content should be integrated into regular courses in nursing, physiotherapy, and occupational therapy programmes. Social work and teaching professionals suggested the introduction of specialized course about cultural competence and serving ethnoculturally diverse groups. All professional groups, aside from physiotherapists, recommended increasing students' face-to-face interactions with ethnoculturally diverse groups through exchange programmes, site visits, overseas study trips, and so on. Key informants all agreed that it is effective to offer cultural competence training for students who are still undergoing training, rather than pushing frontline workers to receive more on-the-job training, as these workers do not have spare time to receive training and many of them already experience stress at work.
16. Nurses, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists suggested to provide frontline practitioners with more assistive materials, such as learning from guidelines instead of receiving training. Nurses would prefer attending one-off practical workshops, whereas physiotherapists and occupational therapists preferred receiving online training due to their tight working schedules. Social workers and teachers would like to attend interactive training courses offered in the form of workshop series.
17. Regarding the content of training activities, frontline practitioners all recommended having a substantial amount of practical elements. It was also suggested to invite some

experienced practitioners and non-Chinese clients to share their experiences and feelings of providing or receiving social services. However, the content of training curricula offered by tertiary institutions could be more theoretical, as students need to develop a deeper understanding of the rationale behind cultural competence and its importance in serving non-Chinese clients.

### **Facilitators and barriers to receiving cultural competence training**

18. With respect to facilitating factors associated with cultural competence training, all key informants suggested that practitioners should be provided with incentives such as flexible work hours and professional recognition in order to encourage them to receive training. Additionally, if the content is applicable and specifically designed for individual human service professions rather than offering general programmes or activities for all professionals, training would be attractive as practitioners would feel that the activities are more relevant to them.
19. With respect to barriers to receiving training, heavy workloads experienced by professionals and infrequent encounters with non-Chinese clients were the main factors discouraging further training in cultural competence.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Suggestions for educational programmes for human service professions**

20. Frontline practice in Hong Kong can present very high time and effort demands when graduates enter the field. Therefore, cultural competence training should begin early in professional training programmes offered by higher education institutions.
21. There exists an ongoing debate on the use of specific designated courses versus an infusion approach to cultural competence training. Previous literature suggests that cultural competence should be immersed in existing curricula, with research findings demonstrating the effectiveness of the infusion model of teaching in enriching students' cultural knowledge and enhancing their ability to work with ethnoculturally diverse groups. However, some key informants from social work and teaching professions supported the model of offering specialized courses on cultural competence and cultural issues. This approach would only benefit learners enrolled in these specific courses unless they are made compulsory in training curricula. In view of the inconclusive outcomes on the benefits of infusion approaches versus specific designated courses, more research is needed to assess the learning and related professional training outcomes associated with these two different models in higher learning institutions. Additionally, higher education institutions

and qualification accreditation or regulatory bodies should consider issues of curriculum change and program accreditation requirements.

22. As a quick ‘kickstart’ step, professional programs should develop specific courses to increase understanding of ethnocultural diversity issues when working with service targets. Caution should be taken in curriculum design so as to prevent unintentional stereotypes or stigmatization from being further perpetuated in the content and delivery of these courses.
23. For well-designed immersion or infusion approaches to be established and adopted, training for educators would be required to equip them with sensitivity, awareness, knowledge, and perspectives to enable them to decide how their respective training curricula could be adapted or modified to integrate cultural competence concepts and components alongside key professional practice content.
24. It is recommended that educators enrich students’ cultural knowledge and awareness and cultivate cultural sensitivity in a comprehensive way. Therefore, educators should not only teach students content about ethnoculturally diverse groups and principles such as diversity, social justice, and equality. They should also provide students with opportunities to interact with ethnoculturally diverse communities through multiple means, such as exchange programmes, service learning, site visits, and so on. This training should be both knowledge- and experientially focused, in order to strengthen students’ ability and sensitivity to work with people from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds.

### **Recommendations for on-the-job training for human service professions**

25. The major challenge to cultural competence training for human service professionals is their tight and busy work schedules. Therefore, employers should provide time release to encourage practitioners to attend training. Formal training programs and certificates could be used as incentive to motivate a higher level of participation, and continuous education units or continuous professional accreditation mechanisms could be established for tracking professional development training received by various practitioners.
26. Regarding the content of training, covering factual knowledge such as cultural traits, customs, and taboos is not enough. Professional attitudes and sensitivity towards clients’ needs should be also emphasized in training for professionals, and understanding power differentials and various anti-oppressive and social justice perspectives are essential aspects of the theoretical base for culturally competent practice. Specific training content should be designed for each of the different human service professions, to ensure that training is more relevant and in alignment with the practice realities of practitioners from different disciplines.

## **Suggestions for institutional changes**

27. In response to the lack of awareness or capacities to serve the ethnoculturally diverse groups on the part of mainstream organizations, it is suggested that all practitioners should improve their cultural competence regardless of the size of ethnoculturally diverse population they need to serve. Additionally, the services should be more user-friendly for the ethnoculturally diverse clients. For example, the interpretation services and information sheets should be available in English and certain ethnic languages whenever possible. A centralized pool of interpretative services should be established for all practitioners and service targets.
28. Ethnocultural diversity is a fact in Hong Kong's population. The government is obligated to regularize specialized social service units and projects serving culturally diverse groups, to ensure that access to services is more equitable and sustainably maintained. To respond to the problem that the current funding mode cannot benefit all primary schools with non-Chinese speaking students and the sustainability concerns of specialized social service units and agencies, resources should be equitably provided for schools and social service organizations to support them better serve culturally diverse service users, despite their relatively small population size among all service users. We recommend that for those schools with non-Chinese speaking students, a "Diversity Liaison Officer" should be appointed to be responsible for promoting diversity and inclusiveness, prevention of discrimination, equal opportunities and the psychosocial needs of the students.
29. To satisfy ethnoculturally diverse clients, we need to take up a "cultural competence lens" during each stage of the process. A cultural sensitivity screening framework should be formulated as an evaluation tool to examine if the existing policies, programs and services may fulfill the needs of ethnoculturally diverse clients. Thus, we recommend government departments, NGOs, and service units to regularly adopt the cultural competence lens to develop their practices and to review their status in order to ensure that their services are fulfilling the needs of all social groups, in terms of their human resource deployment, service and program delivery, organization structure, and logistic and administrative characteristics.
30. Codes of professional practice and professional protocols for local practitioners should be amended to explicitly require practitioners to be culturally competent in practice. Professional qualification criteria should also be adapted to make cultural competence training an essential training component in education and training curricula for human service professions.

31. Finally, other stakeholders such as public sector and media should help to reduce stereotypes towards ethnoculturally diverse groups in Hong Kong and help to enhance public awareness of the importance of cross-cultural acceptance and integration.