STUDENT SUCCESS
https://studentsuccessjournal.org/
Volume **15** (1) 2024 https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.3085

Supporting Those Who Provide Support: What Do University Student-Facing Staff Say About Training for Working with Diverse Cohorts?

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Abstract

Increasing access for underrepresented cohorts to higher education has long been a priority internationally, and Australia is no exception. While universities offer a range of services in the areas of Equity, Career Development and Academic Advising (ECDAA) to support student success, there is little understanding of how these student-facing support staff are supported to work with diverse student cohorts. This is particularly the case when working with cultural and linguistic marginalised (CALM) students such as international students, refugees or migrants. This article examines the differing levels of knowledge and experience ECDAA practitioners' have in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students in Australian universities, and the challenges practitioners face in accessing professional development to support them in their roles. While the importance of tailoring support services to meet the needs of diverse student cohorts is recognised, our findings highlight the need to provide ongoing professional development to support practitioners in the delivery of nuanced support services to CALM students.

***Keywords**:* Diversity; Culturally and Linguistically Marginalised; student support; equity practice; academic advising.

Introduction

The diversification of the university student cohort, largely as a result of widening participation and internationalisation agendas (Gayton, 2020) means Australian universities can no longer rest on traditionally held assumptions about what students know and bring to their studies. Commensurate with the growing and diverse student cohort are increased risks of attrition (Stephenson et al., 2021). The high-stakes implications (financial and moral) of dropping out are magnified for 'equity cohorts'— underrepresented groups of domestic students in higher education. Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) practice in Australian universities is largely funded from the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)

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(Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021). This policy and funding mechanism directs universities to focus on three student groups: low socioeconomic, First Nations and regional, rural, and remote (RRR) backgrounds. However, some universities are more creative at capturing other student groups in their equity programs, such as people with a disability, first-in-family students, and people from Culturally and Linguistically Marginalised Migrant and/or Refugee (CALMMR) backgrounds.

Equity cohorts often experience cumulative disadvantage than more advantaged students and this is associated with markedly poorer outcomes along the student life course (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). As a result, there is an intense focus in the scholarly literature on undergraduate student success and retention in higher education, dominated by discussions about good practice supports and interventions (Roberts, 2018; Sneyers & De Witte, 2018). Addressing the matter of success and retention is complex and multifaceted, with universities implementing a range of services, such as career development, academic advising, and equity assistance, to support an increasingly diverse undergraduate population.

While there is also a need to respond in equitable ways to the needs of students who experience intersecting and compounding forms of educational disadvantage, less is known about the perceptions of the staff employed to offer support, particularly with First Nations and CALMMR cohorts. This article responds to this gap in knowledge and offers reflections from an Australia-wide study that examined how Equity, Career Development and Academic Advising (ECDAA) practitioners perceive their preparedness and capacity for working with CALMMR students in universities. Specifically, we explore the training they have had for working with so-called 'diverse students', which may cover such topics such as cultural practices conventions, preferences, multilingualism, migration, trauma, implicit bias and cultural (or colonial) load.

Who is 'Diverse' in Australian Higher Education?

Although we use the terms *diverse* and *diversity* throughout this article because they align with institutional terminology, we want to problematise the assumed norm (white, Anglophone, middle class, with a family history of higher education participation) against which diverse cohorts are measured. While the rhetoric of EDI in higher education celebrates the multicultural and multifaceted (such as (a)neurotypicality, sexuality, ablebodiedness; albeit not so much the multilingual) composition of the student and staff body, diversity can also be used as a proxy for concerns about and scrutiny of student outcomes. The idea of diversity—while seemingly benign on the surface—inadvertently benchmarks against the mainstream. This is particularly problematic in settler-colonial contexts, where First Nations students are captured under the CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) category despite being the original owners of the land on which Australian higher education does business. The violence of settler-colonialism, through the imposition of western/Euro-centric systems and the monolingual use of English, has resulted in demonstrable disadvantage for First Nations Australians (Parliament of Australia, 2023), which is especially evident in educational outcomes. We do not wish for our article to reify this subordination of diversity and we return to this argument throughout the article. We also do not wish to suggest any homogeneity in any cohort; we recognise that within demographic categories, there is an abundance of individuality and nuance.

In this article, we focus on one cohort—CALMMR students—because they often experience complex, intersectional forms of educational disadvantage which magnifies their exclusion. However, without being a formally identified equity cohort in policy and funding, we have limited information about their engagement with higher education.[1] Despite minimal data, research has illustrated the significant barriers to accessing and engaging with university faced by CALMMR students (Baker et al., 2018; Perales et al., 2021), such as with academic language and literacy development, navigating unfamiliar systems and connecting with others (Grüttner, 2019), and accessing supports, especially when they are digital rather than people-rich (Baker et al., 2018). Moreover, although they share many support needs with international (full-fee-paying) students, CALMMR students are often unable to access bespoke supports offered to international students because of their domestic student status (Molla, 2021). The siloing of supports across international and domestic cohorts disadvantages CALMMR students, because although their needs are similar to those of international students, they are denied access to international services because of their classification as domestic students (Molla, 2021; Perales et al., 2021).

[1] We note that the Australian government continues to gather data on NESB university students, but they are not included in HEPPP funding and therefore universities are not mandated to provide targeted supports, nor gather data on their participation in higher education.

Literature Review

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Neoliberal University

Although the EDI agenda has strong social justice roots, it has to be understood against the backdrop of a corporate higher education sector. The dominance of metrics in guiding university policy and practice priorities, coupled with federal policy that focuses on the (unhelpfully) broad equity categories of low SES, Indigenous and RRR cohorts, means that nuanced responses that recognise intersectional educational disadvantage are overlooked. As Bob Lingard (2011) succinctly noted, such "policy by numbers" is a reductive exercise that conceals complex lived experiences, meaning that funding and practice is not always targeted where it is needed most.

Discussions about these tensions range from the discursive, noting how universities use the language of EDI to market and jostle for competitive advantage (Bowl, 2018), to the imperative to cut costs and find efficiencies often results in decisions that serve the institution's financial, rather than EDI, mission. It is difficult to argue against the promise held by the notion of diversity; as Louise Archer (2007) in her discussion of diversity discourses noted, "[Diversity] is so apparently benign and 'good' that it silences other interpretations, thus "render[ing] those who resist it unintelligible or morally reprehensible" (p. 648).

What Does Support for Diverse Students Look Like in the Neoliberal University?

Student supports include services such as: accommodations for physical or mental health reasons additional financial support; additional study support with adapting to university study/ language/ literacy; counselling and psychological help; careers guidance. Although providing support is a prevalent and universal concern for universities—with Engstrom and Tinto (2008) famously writing that access without support is not opportunity—there is little in the way of a shared definition of what support looks like and should be offered. This debate is particularly important for diverse cohorts, who often have specific support needs that result from their circumstances (Jabbar & Mirza, 2019).

Cost-efficient agendas make targeted support difficult to offer and sustain. The pursuit of increased efficiency dividends and new public management governance models has seen the decimation of support services as the managerial class has grown (Croucher & Woelert, 2022). Support services are increasingly being outsourced or centralised, often with significant impacts to students and staff (Connell, 2019). Such efficiencies actively undermine the provision of consistent and person-centred supports, which research shows are best for supporting the needs of students with complex circumstances and who do not necessarily have strong networks who are familiar with university expectations and practices (Baker et al., 2018).

Despite the importance of support for helping students to participate and succeed in their studies, there is little known about how student-facing support staff understand and respond to diversity within the student cohort. In this article, we specifically refer to people working in ECDAA roles. We know little about the training ECDAA practitioners have received for working with diverse cohort, and less about their connections with the Professional Associations (PAs) that represent their professional needs. While some studies have explored the perspectives of Career Development Practitioners regarding equity cohorts (such as Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017), little is known about how equity practitioners and academic advisors perceive their work in the context of diversity. This article therefore examines how ECDAA practitioners talk about how prepared or trained they feel to meet the needs of diverse cohorts. The research questions that frame this article are:

- *What do ECDAA practitioners say about their engagement with diversity training and/or professional development?*
- *What do practitioners say about the relationship between access to diversity training and supporting diverse student cohorts?*
- *What strategies and resources do practitioners describe for supporting diverse student cohorts?*

ECDAA Supports and their Professional Associations in Australia

Success and retention are critical issues that universities are grappling with within the context of widening participation and increased scrutiny of institutional quality and accountability (Sadowski et al., 2017). This article is set against the context of recent higher education reforms in Australia which have introduced performance-based funding for universities, providing greater protections for academic progression and engagement, but increased pressure on universities to support all students. Since then, universities have implemented a range of services to support identified challenges students experience (lack of preparedness of university study, the need for just-in-time access to support, and course and program difficulties, and academic achievement) to enhance student success.

As such, ECDAA have emerged as key professions to support the success and retention of higher education students. ECDAA practitioners all engage in similar work: client-centred and focused on individualised interactions with students. Additionally, they share common values and motives with regard to helping students to succeed in their studies. ECDAA roles are primarily student-facing—in-person, online, hybrid—and as such, practitioners are on the 'front line', working with the full-spectrum of diversity represented in the student-body. Students often approach ECDAA staff for assistance with other matters unrelated to their area of expertise; as a result, they are often the first point of contact for assistance relating to social support, housing, and mental health. Each of these three areas of support have at least one PA that represents and advocates for issues on their broad professional area. There is significant variation across the PAs: some organise annual conferences to bring colleagues together; some run professional development; some accredit professional training. Most PAs are run by university staff members and affiliates in a voluntary capacity; few have paid staff to run the association.

Equity practice refers to the supports offered by universities to equity students, largely via programs with external partners (such as school outreach, early admissions schemes, or collaborations with TAFE colleges[2]), through internal programs (such as mentoring initiatives, case work), or directly to students through scholarships. The term 'Equity Practitioner' captures many roles and responsibilities—such as engagement officers, student advisors, university ambassadors—with different areas of focus and mostly student-facing, some of which are specialist (for example, disability support) and some which are generalist. Most practitioners are employed on professional contracts and, as HEPPP is allocated on an annual basis, many work on fixed-term contracts. This results in high staff turnover, with the significant risk of organisational memory loss (Berg et al., 2023).

Career development describes the process of managing one's life, learning, and work and is also used as an overarching term for the profession (Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA), 2019). Career development is underpinned by well-developed practices and an extensive theory base, emanating from centuries old disciplines, such as vocational psychology, sociology, and organisational psychology (McMahon & Arthur, 2018). It is a recognised occupation requiring specialised knowledge, training, and skills (O'Reilly et al., 2020). Despite the implementation of professional standards for the profession, which can be considered fundamental in establishing a professional status, career development is often viewed as a disparate field (Athanasou, 2012). While the profession is underpinned by professional standards, career development does not have external or governmental regulation mandating standards and qualifications for entry into the profession (O'Reilly et al., 2020).

Academic advising refers to situations where a practitioner gives direction or insight to a university student regarding academic, social, or personal matters. Academic Advisors (AA) may be located within faculties or form part of shared services and the broad nature of their roles means they often students' first point of contact on a range of issues. Academic advisors therefore frequently occupy the role providing the 'social glue' within institutions, connecting students with other university services, and forming important meaningful relationships with students (Dollinger et al., 2021).

Methodology

This qualitative study used a mixed-methods research design, and was conducted in three phases: firstly, we undertook content analysis of professional association documentation available through public facing websites; secondly, we conducted interviews with representatives of professional associations; and thirdly, we interviewed ECDAA practitioners who worked at public universities across Australia. Ethical approval was gained from the University of New South Wales [HC200574]. It is important to note that the research reported in this article was gathered after the initial global lockdown that occurred due to COVID-19 in March 2020. As such, we offer an account in the hyper-complex context of early pandemic responses from Australian universities.

In the first phase, we examined publicly available documents obtained from the websites of the following PAs: Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia (EPHEA), Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL), National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (NAGCAS), Career Development Association of Australia (CDAA), and Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association (ANZSSA). The documents selected related to the overarching goals and vision of the PA and included information on membership categories and eligibility, strategic plans, constitutional documents, press releases and requirements for professional development.

In the second phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of three PAs: two with a career focus and one with an equity focus. The key academic advising PA did not respond to an invitation to participate. Each PA representative participated in an individual interview that explored the mission of the association, their responsibility and provision to

[2] In Australia, TAFE refers to Technical and Further Education, a vocational training provider run by each state government in Australia.

members, training offered (if at all), and their knowledge of initiatives that have explicitly focused on diversity (specifically with CALMMR and First Nations students) and EDI more broadly. Their details are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of the PA Representative-Interviewees

Participant	Professional Association
A	Career-focused Professional Association 1 (CFPA1)
B	Career-focused Professional Association 2 (CFPA2)
C	Equity-focused Professional Association (EFPA)

Finally, in the third phase we spoke to 30 ECDAA practitioners employed at 15 Australian tertiary institutions. These people were recruited by purposive sampling via their professional networks and/ or professional associations and identified as knowledgeable about, or experience with, the research topic, as well as by snowball recruitment. Interviews took place online and were approximately 45 minutes in length. Interview questions centred on the role of the practitioner, the training required or undertaken for the role, and the perceived impact of the role of student success and retention. The transcripts of each interview were coded independently by each member of the research team, then discussed as a group. An overview of our participants is included in Table 2.

Researcher Backgrounds and Positionality

The researchers in this study have approached the topic with both an insider and an outsider perspective. At the time of the study, all of the research team were working in higher education roles, including working directly in student support areas (Samantha, Tessa and Farhana). The expertise and interests of the research team includes personal and professional experience supporting refugees and migrants, academic research and membership to relevant professional bodies in student support and refugee and migrant support. Preconceptions and assumptions about the research topic were discussed in depth prior to commencing the study and regular meetings allowed the research team to discuss and dissect biases.

Data Analysis

The data from the three sources (websites of professional associations, interviews with ECDAA practitioners and interviews with representatives of EDCAA professional associations) was analysed in the following way. For the websites, we selected content from each association relating to organisational goals and values and included information pertaining to membership, professional standards, and professional development. The aim was to determine how the professional association viewed their role in relation to the training or the professional development of their members. In addition, more precise information could be gathered about the type and subject matter of any professional development offered along with any specific references to cultural and linguistic diversity and/or First Nations peoples (or diversity more broadly). The units of analysis included the presence and frequency of words, themes and concepts relating to categories of professional development, qualifications, training, and diversity. For example, information regarding membership eligibility was analysed to determine if specific qualifications were required or if ongoing professional development was mandated. Materials were coded manually using the pre-determined coding terms and data was recorded in a spreadsheet.

Analysis of the interview data occurred with a manual review then utilising qualitative analysis software (NVivo), drawing on Braun and Clark's (2021) guidelines for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to make sense of what our participants discussed. Interview transcripts were inductively coded for familiarisation and refinement of codes, with the resulting codebooks cross-referenced with all members of the team to ensure consistency across the generated themes. During this stage our insider perspective allowed us to identify and refine familiar themes, while the outsider perspective (from those who had not worked directly in student support roles) allowed the group to identify themes from a different perspective and pick up on points that may have been missed. The 'R' in RTA requires us to reflexively draw on our "subjectivity as analytic *resource*" (Braun & Clark, 2021, p. 330; emphasis in original). Our composition as a group of practitioners (Samantha, Tessa, Farhana) and academic (Sally and Clemence) researchers meant that we were able to bring our own lenses to the interpretive work, in terms of own positioning as well as our own experience of working in support roles, and membership of the various PAs included in Phase 1.

Table 2

Overview of Participants

Participant	Role[3]	Member of PA?	Highest qualification (where known)
1	CA	NAGCAS	Graduate Certificate in Careers Education
2	PA	NAGCAS	Master of Counselling
3	AA	AALL	Master of Adult Education
4	EP	NAGCAS	
5	EP	NAGCAS	Graduate Certificate in Careers Education
6	PA	NAGCAS	Master of Education Graduate Diploma in Careers Education
7	CA	NAGCAS CDAA	Graduate Diploma in Education Graduate Certificate in Careers Education
8	CA	NAGCAS, AAGE	Graduate Certificate in Careers Education
9	EP	EPHEA	
10	AA	AALL	Master of TESOL
11	CA		
12	AA		PhD
13	AA	AALL	PhD
14	EP	NAGCAS	
15	EP		Master of Social Work
16	CA	NAGCAS/AAGE	Graduate Certificate in Careers Education
17	CA	NAGCAS	Graduate Certificate in Careers Education Masters by Research
18	CA	NAGCAS	Graduate Diploma in Careers Education
19	CA	CDAA	Graduate Certificate in Career Development
20	CA		Master of Psychology
21	AA	AALL	Master of Applied Linguistics
22	EP	ANZSA	Postgrad Psych and Counselling
23	CA		
24	EP		
25	CA	NAGCAS/CDAA	Master of Education, Career Development
26	EP		Graduate Certificate in Disability Education Master of Human Services
27	EP	EPHEA/CDAA	Graduate Certificate in Careers Education
28	EP	EPHEA	
29	CA	NAGCAS/CDAA	Grad Cert Careers, currently doing M(Phil)
30	PB		

[3] CA = Careers Advisor, AA = Academic Advisor, EP = Equity Practitioner, PA = Peak Association Representative

Findings

Analysis of Professional Association Websites and Documentation

Reviewing the membership categories of the Professional Associations (PAs) provides useful information on the qualifications, experience and standards expected for practitioners, and the minimum requirements to join. This information is summarised in the Appendix. Most of the participants in this study held individual membership to their PA and were responsible for the cost of membership. In most PAs, membership is conditional upon working (or having previously worked) and/or studying in the relevant area and paying a membership fee. However, two divergent policy directions are noted. First, some associations (EPHEA, AALL, ANZSSA) have adopted an open policy where membership is granted based on an individual's role and there is no minimum qualification or experience requirement. The second type of policy granted membership to individuals with a minimum level of post-graduate qualification, or who could satisfy other standards. NAGCAS and CDAA have a mandated minimum level of qualification or experience and ongoing professional development requirements.

Professional associations differ in their approach to professional development, which aligns to their approach on membership policy. All associations offer their members opportunities for professional development, ranging from networking events, thought leadership, research updates, guest speakers and training workshops, and an annual conference. For all but two associations, participation in further professional development is voluntary and does not contribute to a mandated minimum requirement for continuing professional development. For these associations, members can join without a requirement for mandatory continuing professional development.

References to professional development were contained in all the key documents relating to the goals, mission, or vision of each association and can be perceived as an important, priority area. For example, EPHEA has two organisational goals, one of which relates to professional development, member expertise and best practice. Similarly, of AALL's six goals, two pertain to sharing good practice and learning through professional development. This was common to all professional associations in the study. However, professional membership to NAGCAS and CDAA differs as these PA mandate on-going professional development. NAGCAS and CDAA professional members are required to complete a minimum number of hours of professional development each year which can be completed by taking part in a variety of approved activities as set out in the membership guidelines. Records of professional development are to be maintained and are subject to yearly random audits by the Career Industry Council of Australia (2021).

References to Diversity on PA Websites

While all professional associations refer to diversity and inclusiveness on their public facing websites, only EPHEA, CDAA and ANZSSA had specific references to CALMMR and First Nations. NAGCAS had specific references to First Nations, however lacked specific reference to CALMMR cohorts. For the professional associations that specifically reference CALMMR and/or First Nations (EPHEA, CDAA, ANZSSA and NAGCAS), references were contained within constitutional documents (EPHEA), professional standards (ANZSSA and CDAA), or had provided one-off professional development workshops (NAGCAS, CDAA and ANZSSA) specific to working with these student cohorts.

Overall, findings from the document analysis show associations appear to acknowledge the importance of professional development to their members which is evidenced in organisational aims and services to members. Some associations, specifically NAGCAS and CDAA, take this a step further and make professional development a requirement of membership, while others adopt a voluntary approach. There also appears to be awareness of the significance of diversity and inclusiveness in a general sense, however, acknowledging the specific needs of CALMMR or First Nations is less obvious.

Perspectives on Diversity: Professional Associations

The interviews with PA representatives highlighted the variability across the sector and across support services with the explicit foregrounding and acknowledgement of EDI and diversity in the mission of the PA. In support of our analysis of the analysis of PA public documentation, none of the PA interviewees were aware of the provision of CALMMR, First Nations, or EDI-specific resources or training for members. A notable exception is found in Participant B's description accreditation of the postgraduate certification that all CD practitioners need to attain to work in a higher education setting:

> … so, the qualification is accredited by this [Career-Focused PA], and it has to meet those standards. So, in there you learn these seven core competencies, and one of them is diversity and inclusion. And the two key competencies there, are recognize and respect diversity, and the other is conduct career development work in culturally sensitive ways. (Participant B, CFPA2)

In responding to questions about their awareness of the PA position on diversity issues and supports for members, Participant A (CFPA1) and Participant C (EFPA) identified some awareness of general challenges that the cohort face but limited if any targeted responses. For instance, Participant A identifies how any supports "happens by default rather than intention":

> … there's never been anything specific that we would sort of say, "Oh, we've identified that as a cohort," and we have a specific strategy to deal with them, other than we'd have connections through our equity department to maybe run support programs for specific cohorts that may or may not have included some of the people from those types of backgrounds, if they become under the equity banner, or are tagged as equity students…. (Participant A, CFPA1)

Targeting support for students who are not a formally identified equity cohort in federal policy or funding was recognised as difficult. Participant C (EFPA) offered a similar reflection about CALMMR students:

> I haven't really seen that many universities sort of target [CALMMR students], specifically, or provide support specifically for migrants, or refugees. I know some universities do work in the refugee and asylum seeker space. But it's not like a big movement or a big effort across the board, because everyone thinks of low SES and they just think of like domestic students, and Anglo-Saxon, white domestic students. Even for First Nations students, they're not really considered under that because they've got their own funding. So, it's always treated separately, as well. (Participant C, EFPA)

As Participant C notes, the distinctions between student cohorts (for example, CALMMR and international; equity and First Nations) expose sharp differences in resourcing and supports, with international and First Nations students both recipients of targeted funding and programs. In stark contrast, CALMMR are neither captured under equity funding, nor can they readily access international student supports, despite sharing similar resourcing challenges to students from low SES cohorts, and linguistic challenges similar to those of international students.

Diminishing allocation—or absence—of funding and resources was noted by the PA representatives as a significant challenge to providing responsive support to members. The Australian higher education sector has suffered from persistent personnel cuts (and not just because of COVID), which have shifted where support staff and services sit within institutions and have consequently impacted on professional identity and provision of targeted supports. As Participant A (CFPA1) described: "In more recent years we've been restructured and ... turned upside down … our capacity was reduced in a restructure, so the way we deploy our services is very different" (Participant, CFPA1).

While the reduction in funding and workforce presents evident challenges, Participant A notes how this has forced Career Development colleagues to work in more innovative and interdisciplinary ways. However, the reduction of resources and reliance on HEPPP funding, which is allocated annually, has significant implications for staff capacity, as articulated by Participant C (EFPA):

> … I was really, really tired of the one-year rolling contracts and not knowing until like the last day of uni whether or not I'm coming back in January. Because you can't plan ahead, you can't plan long-term. And the projects that make the biggest impacts are the ones that take time. (Participant C, EFPA)

The high turnover of staff, resulting from the instability of not knowing whether funding will be available year-on-year, results in organisational memory loss (Berg et al., 2023), where network knowledge is lost when staff leave, as Participant C captures:

> It also really impacts a lot of those projects … I've seen Ally programs at different universities kind of take-off and then disappear because the person driving it disappears. … I feel like a lot of these diverse projects are really people driven as well, so when people move on then it's just not, you know, it doesn't have the same impact and there's no one there to push it. (Participant C, EFPA)

A further challenge created by diminishing funding is not just the cost to personnel but also the capacity to tailor programs for the needs of a diverse cohort. When universities and PAs are unable to provide cohort-specific supports, responsibility is passed to individual staff members to fill those gaps. Participant C describes how they have located diversity training materials from external organisations, such as state governments or non-government organisations, to ensure that there is cultural diversity training available in their institution. Such ingenuity speaks to Participant C's commitment to their field, but also takes on the responsibility of organisations and institutions to provide higher education/institution-specific resources, which conversely disincentives universities to invest time and resources.

Perspectives on Working with and Training for Diversity: ECDAA Practitioners

There were four main ways participants had accessed or experienced diversity training. Firstly, diversity training as either a mandatory or elective component of a formal qualification. This was particularly applicable to those participants who had undertaken relevant postgraduate qualifications. Secondly, diversity training which had been provided by the employing institution. Employer initiated training was offered as either an optional course on a voluntary basis or it was included as part of mandatory training such as during the employee induction/on-boarding process. Thirdly, diversity training which had been arranged and offered by relevant professional associations, which sometimes carried a fee and/or could accrue professional development points. Lastly, a number of participants had initiated their own diversity training through engaging with third parties.

There was similarity across all three professions regarding their perceptions and experiences of diversity training. When addressed as a component of formal qualifications, diversity subjects and materials were often seen to be "too general". Participants were not aware of or were not able to recall any particular reference to CALMMR specifically and they frequently spoke of the theoretical aspects of diversity. This sentiment is captured in the following responses when participants were asked about diversity content in their formal qualifications:

> I guess my takeaway is, I need to consider diversity. But in terms of actionable, practical, advice or information, not as much on that side… (Participant 16, CA)

> [N]othing in depth. (Participant 19, CA)

There were frequent references to a desire for more applied diversity training and the need for specificity. Practitioners in all three professions were aware of diversity concepts in a broad sense, and the benefit of taking an individualised approach with students. However, a common response was that awareness alone was inadequate, and participants expressed the desire for more tangible, practical strategies. In addition, participants spoke of the potential for problems or even causing harm *without* mandated training, as captured in the following response: "Because you learn by experience … without any mandated training, you'll observe people doing what they've been taught, which means that really crap practice can travel" (Participant 13, AA).

What Strategies and Resources did ECDAA Practitioners Discuss for Supporting Diverse Students?

The diversity content, where it existed, within formal qualifications was considered too general by all participants. As such, individuals had frequently initiated their own training and development. Participants noted that some of the most effective diversity training came from collaborations with knowledge experts or providers who focused on CALMMR and First Nations students specifically. In particular, this more targeted training provided the practical skills practitioners were seeking as well as up-to-date, relevant information, such as tips like "hav[ing] at the bottom of your email that you respect and acknowledge your Traditional Owners" (Participant 14, EP). When individuals had sought their own training, in addition to having a more practical focus, it was also perceived to be more relevant to their student body and local context:

> And I've actually found one from [name of provider] and it's really focused on the multicultural and diverse community in (state), as well. So, they are a bit more relevant, I guess, to our university. (Participant 30, PB)

> …we just came back from two days the whole team of a cultural retreat down the coast with an Indigenous leader there, which is really amazing…and from this year, we've started really seeking-out contacts within our refugee community. (Participant 28, EP)

Participants described being tired of generic 'tick-box' training or training that was delivered by people considered to be unsuitable. Comments such as " … not another white man" captured the need for the trainer to be experienced, credible and ideally represent the background of the CALMMR group.

> Training that is on offer.. it's going to be limited by the expertise of the particular people. And they will have a particular perspective, which may not be wrong perspective, but it's just, it's limited… (Participant 23, CA)

> So, I think really seeing the stories and the perspectives of the people that are having this lived experience is really valuable. I'm never going to be able to fully understand what it's like to have these needs, but if you can tell me what it's like for you to have these needs, that can help me incorporate that knowledge and apply. (Participant 20, CA)

Discussion

We set out to explore the levels of diversity awareness and training among student-facing support staff, specifically in ECDAA roles. The value of these roles is well-established (Roberts, 2018; Sneyers & De Witte, 2018), making an essential contribution to student retention and achievement. However, although diversity is a prevalent discourse and marketing term (Archer, 2007; Bowl, 2018), its reputational currency does not translate into available training or support to help ECDAA practitioners to work with CALMMR and First Nations students. In response to RQ1, regarding what ECDAA practitioners say about their engagement with diversity training and/or professional development, our findings suggest that a lack of training to work with the needs of diverse cohorts, like CALMMR and First Nations students, leaves support staff feeling unsupported.

Our findings illustrate that help for working with diverse cohorts is identified as a desired area for professional development, meaning ECDAA practitioners perceived significant gaps between their professional development (PD) needs and the support they felt able to offer (RQ2). Like Jabbar and Mirza (2019), we cannot point to a gold standard in diversity PD; instead, we similarly advocate for universities to tailor their training to the needs of their locality and to meet their institutional context. Across the 15 universities represented in the study, there is evident need to improve PD. Participants reported differing levels of knowledge and experience in supporting diverse cohorts and we take this as a reflection of the limited training opportunities (if any) either before or after commencing their role. A complicating factor is that there is often no clear career path or minimum competency standard required to work with these cohorts, presumably making it difficult for universities or PAs to justify the cost of training or PD. Despite the fact that ECDAA practitioners are on the whole highly qualified (most hold a minimum postgraduate level of education), pathways into the profession are diverse and prior experience/qualifications are often unrelated to their current role. Compounding this is a lack of consistent PD opportunities or minimum requirements when they enter the role, and this is particularly the case for AAs and EPs. The ongoing reduction of professional and support staff roles (Croucher & Woelert, 2022) further complicates matters for ECDAA practitioners

The lack of mandated requirements has not prevented ECDAA practitioners from voicing their concerns or from educating themselves and seeking out their own professional development (RQ3), although we found fewer strategies and more critique of the current PD opportunities, which did not meet their needs with regard to working with CALMMR and First Nations students. Our participants understood the barriers many students were facing and there were frequent mentions that they wanted to “do more”. Consequently, empathy was mentioned frequently, as was a strong desire to help in a tangible way, being pro-active, “making a difference” and contributing positively to a student’s experience. Moreover, our participants were acutely aware of the complexity of their roles and strongly desired more tailored support in the form of specific training and development. When practitioners at different institutions are describing similar experiences and voicing similar concerns, a gap in support is highlighted that urgently needs a response from universities.

In terms of responsibility for such training, this remains an endemic ‘hot potato’. While universities, as employers, have a duty of care to prepare their staff for the complexities of supporting an increasingly diversified student body, PAs are ideally located to provide professional development, and arguably have a clear mandate to do so. PAs place value on the professionalisation of their members, which should include EDI concerns. However, consistent with the funding dilemma raised by Lingard (2011), if professional membership is not mandatory, individuals often bear the cost for membership as well as any additional training. With the average cost of individual membership at over AU$130 per year, it is another cost individuals are expected to burden.

Conclusion

For universities to thrive, supporting and ensuring the success of all students is a priority, but particularly so for those who are considered at risk, such as First Nations and CALMMR cohorts who already experience higher rates of attrition. Ensuring that university staff members are prepared and themselves supported to support these cohorts is imperative; however, our research illustrates how many ECDAA practitioners do not feel they are trained or prepared to work with diverse cohorts. This therefore points to an unmet need for a revised approach to professional development for university staff members. If we accept that diversity is a good thing, we must also accept the responsibility that comes with it. Conversely, if we continue to hope for the best and pass responsibility to individual staff members, we should not be surprised if we continue to see disproportionate levels of attrition within our diversifying student body.

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Please cite this article as:

Kilmartin, S., McCredie, T., Baker, S., Laffernis, F., & Due, C. (2024). Supporting those who provide support: What do university student-facing staff say about training for working with diverse cohorts? *Student Success*, *15*(1), 73-85. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.3085

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Student Success.* Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

Student Success: ***A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.***

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Appendix

Overview of PA Membership Requirements

PA	Website	Profession covered	Membership type	Membership requirements	Requirement for professional development (PD) (points)
EPHEA	www.ephea.org	Equity Practitioners	Institutional and Individual	Employed in an equity role in higher education. No minimum or required qualifications.	No
AALL	www.aall.org.au	Language and Learning Practitioners	Individual	Employed in academic language and learning areas in higher education. No minimum or required qualifications.	No
ANZSSA	www.anzssa.com	All student services	Institutional and Individual	Employed in student services in post-secondary institutions. No minimum or required qualifications	No
CDAA	www.cdaa.org.au	Career Development	Individual	Minimum standards apply (qualifications and/or relevant experience)	Yes, minimum yearly PD requirements, subject to audit.
NAGCAS	www.nagcas.org.au	Career Development	Individual, Institutional Organisational	Minimum standards apply (qualifications and employment in higher education)	Yes, minimum yearly PD requirements, subject to audit.