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ethnicity & health

Health Sector Development

Bilingual Staff Research Project Report



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Reference Group

This project was advised, informed and supported by a reference group comprising:

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**Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health is a statewide program of North Richmond
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Introduction

... language services policy recognises bilingual staff as part of language services but does not elaborate on how they can be used.

The Victorian Multicultural Commission, VMC (formerly the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs) funded CEH to develop a set of guidelines to assist Victorian Government departments and funded agencies in the recruitment and employment of bilingual staff. VMC sought this information to fill a gap in the Victorian Government's language services policy, *Improving the Use of Translating and Interpreting Services: A Guide to Victorian Government Policy and Procedures* (2003).

The Victorian Government's language services policy recognises bilingual staff as part of language services but does not elaborate on how they can be used. Presently, there are no universally accepted standards, qualifications or assessment measures for bilingual staff.

Anecdotal evidence indicated that current practices involving bilingual staff varied widely and in the absence of guidelines, good practices may not be employed. CEH – HSD undertook the research with three guiding questions:

1. How are bilingual staff defined?
2. What is the value of bilingual staff and what roles do they perform?
3. What issues should be considered in employment and retention of bilingual staff?

To develop the guidelines CEH – HSD conducted a literature review and then employed a staged consultative approach including the release of a discussion paper *Defining a Bilingual Worker*, a public forum and a series of round table discussions, that invited participation from government, ethnic communities, the language services sector and service providers.

The following report presents the key findings, recommendations and guidelines for recruiting, employing and working with bilingual staff. For the detailed report on all of the project activities including methodology and discussion paper, please visit www.ceh.org.au/resources.

Key findings

Organisations widely use bilingual staff to bridge communication gaps with clients. While most agencies readily acknowledge the benefits of bilingual staff, there are no existing standards, training or policies to define or contextualise these roles.

Bilingual staff are employed in a range of occupations

Staff who use English and another language in their work are employed in a range of occupations such as receptionists, nurses, attendant carers, financial counsellors, multicultural education aides, community health educators, social workers, case managers, and settlement support workers. This diversity highlights the need to develop a definition applicable across a range of occupations.

The distinction between two-way and three-way communication encounters was not always clear

Some organisations believe they understand the communication encounters of bilingual staff but the implications of confusing two-way communication with three-way communication are not well recognised. Two definitions of bilingual staff have been developed to reflect different language encounters.

Two-way communication:

Staff that communicate in English and another language at a level appropriate to their occupation and function.

Three-way communication:

Staff that communicate in English and another language between two or more parties to facilitate simple communication in their non-occupational role.

... two definitions of bilingual staff have been developed to reflect different language encounters.

Bilingual staff are valuable resources to their organisations

Bilingual staff can fill simple communication gaps promptly. In a three-way communication encounter they bring organisational knowledge. In two-way communication they bring their occupational context and in this way hold a unique value as they have the potential to effectively communicate without third party involvement. This is particularly important when confidentiality is a factor.

Bilingual staff can provide general cultural information and understanding for their organisation about communities with which they work; when used appropriately such staff can be cost effective.

The value of a language assessment

Employers identified a difficulty in assessing a candidate's ability to communicate in a language other than English. Although an informal assessment in English occurs through the recruitment process, many respondents support the development of a formal language assessment.

Culture is considered an integral part of effective communication but needs to be addressed separately

Many respondents believe *culture* is an important component of the definition but terminology use and meanings are contested. Other views express that working effectively between or across culture requires a separate skill set and need not be embedded within the definition of bilingual staff.

The discussion on this topic alone merits further work but is beyond the scope of this research and is a recommendation emerging from this project.

Recruitment and retention of good bilingual staff is difficult

Employers and supervisors commonly express difficulty in finding and keeping good bilingual staff. Some organisations have processes in place addressing employment and retention but want information that will help them achieve better outcomes.

Recommendations

On the basis of issues raised that require further investigation but are beyond the scope of this project, CEH makes the following recommendations:

1. That the State Government fund research about the role and contribution of bicultural staff in government funded services.
2. That the State Government explore the development of a bilingual language assessment for bilingual staff in the government and funded sectors, and that consideration of this tool incorporate standards and supports for an appropriate professional development framework to support the growth of a bilingual workforce across the Victorian public sector.
3. That the State Government consider embedding these bilingual guidelines in existing State Government endorsed policy and procedure and develop an information strategy to assist organisations to implement the guidelines.
4. That government funded service providers review existing organisational language services policy to ensure the role of bilingual staff is adequately outlined within an organisational context and existing language services policy and procedure.
5. That CEH – HSD develop partnerships with health service providers to encourage and support the development of bilingual workforce models that can be documented and promoted by these service providers.
6. That CEH – HSD develop and promote training to support the growth of bilingual staff in government funded services.

The guidelines developed here will assist you to make effective use of bilingual staff and support the delivery of comprehensive language services in your organisation.

Guidelines for recruiting, employing and working with bilingual staff in your organisation



Guidelines for recruiting, employing and working with bilingual staff in your organisation

Acronyms

AUSIT	Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators
ESL	English as a Second Language
ISLPR	International Second Language Proficiency Rating
LA	Language Aide
LOTE	Language other than English
MEA	Multicultural Education Aide
NAATI	National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters

Introduction

The Victorian Government is committed to providing accessible services to all Victorians. As part of this commitment, clients not able to communicate through spoken or written English should have access to professional interpreting and translating services as stated in *Improving the Use of Translating and Interpreting Services: A Guide to Victorian Government Policy and Procedures* (Victorian Government Policy). However, interpreters and translations are not the only means to overcome a language barrier.

Bilingual staff can be a valuable asset to your organisation by communicating with clients with low English language proficiency. Bilingualism is the alternate use of two languages by the same individual.

The guidelines developed here will assist you to make effective use of bilingual staff and support the delivery of comprehensive language services in your organisation.

Key indicators

Who are bilingual staff?

Within government departments, institutions and funded organisations some staff use English and another language in their work. They are employed in a range of occupations such as receptionists, nurses, attendant carers, financial counsellors, multicultural education aides, community health educators, social workers, case managers, court officers and settlement support workers.

Some staff are multilingual possessing knowledge of a number of languages. It is important to recognise that a person's language proficiency may be different for each language and so their ability and capacity to work within each language will be different. Throughout this document staff with language skills for a number of languages are referred to as bilingual staff to reflect the need to treat each language independently.

Bilingual staff can be a valuable asset to your organisation by communicating with clients with low English language proficiency.

What are the differences between bilingual staff and interpreters?

There are a number of important differences between the role of bilingual staff and interpreters, such as qualifications and skills, accountability and professional standards, nature of communication encounter and language proficiency.

Bilingual staff can fill simple communication gaps when working with your client group. Simple communication must be viewed in the context of Victorian Government policy on language services and the organisation's responsibility of duty of care to a client. It is a communication where the outcome has limited risk of adverse effects for both the client and the organisation. Bilingual staff cannot be used to communicate information that is legally binding or puts at risk either the organisation or client. For example, asking a client to sign a consent form is simple but the consequence of poor communication is high. However, giving instructions directing a client to a clinician's room in a large building may be complex but the risk of a serious adverse effect is low if the information is incorrect.

Professional interpreters transfer information between two parties that speak different languages. In accordance with Victorian government policy a professional interpreter must be used when obtaining information from clients or communicating and receiving information to make informed decisions.

Qualifications and skills

Presently there are no universally accepted standards, qualifications or assessment measures for bilingual staff. For this reason bilingual staff should only be used to communicate simple messages. The utilisation of bilingual staff should reflect the guidelines detailed within the Victorian government policy as well as the relevant government department policies and guidelines.

Language proficiency in two languages is a prerequisite to become an interpreter. Interpreters are then trained in the skills of transferral of information accurately and objectively from one language to another, utilising skills such as memory retention, turn taking, appropriate terminology and degree of formality.

Interpreters must be accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), the Australian body that sets and monitors standards. NAATI has four accreditation levels for interpreters. Further details of the NAATI accreditation standards are available at:

<http://www.naati.com.au/at-accreditation.html>

The Victorian Government policy states that interpreters accredited at the professional level should be used as first preference. Further details on the policy are available at: <http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au>

For certain languages for which there is no testing, NAATI provides a recognition credential. Recognition is a separate category from accreditation. It is granted only in languages for which NAATI does not test. Recognition is most commonly granted in new and emerging languages in Australia. More information on recognition is available at: <http://www.naati.com.au/at-recognition.html>

NAATI has a language aide category which it defines as *"an elementary level of language use; it is NOT a translator/interpreter category. It is appropriate for persons who are required to use a minimal knowledge of a language for the purpose of simple communications."*

NAATI only provide this assessment to government employees. Other organisations which have language aides that are not NAATI assessed have developed different definitions and assessments.

Guidelines for recruiting, employing and working with bilingual staff in your organisation

Accountability and professional standards

Bilingual staff are not governed by a common code of ethics but may be governed by relevant professional standards and legislative requirements of their profession. For example, psychologists regardless of which language they work in, are governed by the code of ethics of the Psychologists Registration Board of Victoria as well as the *Psychologists Registrations Act 2000*.

In addition to professional standards, organisations often have codes of conduct which are applicable to all staff. Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs) and other ancillary staff are required to adhere to their school's code of conduct.

The interpreting profession has a code of ethics developed by the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT). Qualified interpreters are expected to adhere to these standards, such as confidentiality, impartiality and accuracy. The AUSIT code of ethics is available at: <http://www.ausit.org>

Nature of the communication encounter

Bilingual staff communicate directly with a client or facilitate simple communication between two parties. For example, a court officer may deal directly with enquiries appropriate to his or her position or facilitate communication where the information would not have legal consequences.

Interpreters undertake formal interpreting between two parties who do not share the same language. Interpreting is the oral transfer of meaning from one language to another.

Language proficiency

Language proficiency is measured through assessment. For bilingual staff an assessment should be conducted in both English and the other language. Currently there is only an assessment for English proficiency but further work is required to adapt this assessment to be relevant for different types of work settings as the assessment must be contextualised. There is no existing Language Other Than English (LOTE) assessment. (For suggestions regarding how to measure language proficiency see '*Language skills to consider when employing bilingual staff in your organisation*' on pages 12–13.)

Interpreters are required to have a level of proficiency in both languages as indicated by their NAATI accreditation level.

Definitions¹

Bilingual staff may use their language skills in two types of communication encounters. These are:

- (1) Two-way communication – using English or another language within their work; and/or,
- (2) Three-way communication – facilitating simple communication between a service provider and service recipient.

Consequently, there are two definitions reflecting this distinction.

¹ This definition and guidelines address the language aspect not the cultural dimension of bilingual staff.

Bilingual staff are not governed by a common code of ethics but may be governed by relevant professional standards and legislative requirements of their profession.

Two-way communication

Staff that communicate in English and another language at a level appropriate to their occupation and function.

Case example

Bilingual Case Management (BCM) positions were established in a number of mental health services in the western region of Melbourne in 1996 in response to client consultations that identified the employment of bilingual staff as a strong preference of clients.

The employer identified which languages were in demand and employed staff with qualifications appropriate to the position. For example only applicants with a clinical psychology background could be employed as a clinical psychologist.

BCM staff undertook complex casework in the preferred language of the patient or family, either in English or the LOTE they were employed to communicate in. The BCM guidelines stated that staff were not to be used as interpreters by colleagues as BCM staff did not possess the required skills nor were they able to fulfil their clinical position adequately.

BCM roles included: case management with a focus on clients from the same ethnic background; secondary consultation to other staff; family education and support; and community education. Due to these additional roles, BCMs direct clinical caseload was ideally less than that of other case managers. The composition of the BCM caseloads was such that they had a mix of clients from the same ethno-linguistic background and from any other background (including Australian born) in order to prevent them from being marginalised from the mainstream work of the clinics.

*In 2000 the Victorian Transcultural Psychiatry Unit published an evaluation of the program Ziguras, S., Stuart, G., Klimidis, S., Minas, H., Lewis, J., Pennella, J., Jackson, A., (2000) **Evaluation of the bilingual case management program**. The report concluded that the BCM program had been successful in improving the quality of, and access to, mental health services for people from non-English speaking backgrounds.*

Three-way communication

Staff that communicate in English and another language between two or more parties to facilitate simple communication in their non-occupational role.

Case example

The City of Darebin launched a Language Aide (LA) program in March 2000. LAs are council employees who are selected to use their LOTE in either a face-to-face or a telephone enquiry to assist in communicating between English-speaking employees and residents who have difficulty communicating in English.

Council staff are selected and must undertake training to be recognised as a LA. The training includes familiarisation with the interpreter's code of ethics and Council's glossary of terms in the LOTE. Darebin Council has policy and procedures that regulate and standardise the activities of the LAs. For example, LAs assist with basic enquiries and have the responsibility to refer more complex or technical matters to a professional accredited interpreter. Managers also have responsibilities in supporting LAs in this function.

Darebin Council institutes a reward system that recognises the LAs skills and services and includes a remuneration allowance.

More information of the City of Darebin's LA program is available at: <http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au>

Guidelines for recruiting, employing and working with bilingual staff in your organisation

Risk Management

Bilingual staff should be used in situations where there are low levels of risk. In some settings the risk of an adverse event through miscommunication is minimal. Every organisation needs to assess levels of risk for the different types of communication encounters conducted across the organisation and then decide when and how to use bilingual staff.

What may begin as a simple communication with a client may become a complex conversation. It is important that when communication exceeds a bilingual staff member's capabilities or is approaching one of the critical points in service provision that a professional interpreter is called.

In some situations bilingual staff may feel pressured to use their LOTE skills. It is recommended that organisations approach bilingual staff to ascertain how comfortable they are using their language skills in the workplace. This needs to be reflected within the staff member's work plan.

Case example:

A resident contacts the council about opening up a pet shop. The call is put through to the council's statutory planning department. The planning officer calls a bilingual staff member trained to facilitate communication in the resident's LOTE. This staff member facilitates communication between the two parties, such as at which address is the business intended to be established and the initial steps required to gain a permit, such as getting the appropriate paperwork. When the conversation turns to statutory planning and amendment requirements, the bilingual staff member tells his planning officer colleague that he cannot continue interpreting as this involves specialised knowledge and terminology that he is not familiar with. The bilingual staff member recommends that the planning officer continue this conversation through a qualified interpreter.

Guidelines

How to effectively work with bilingual staff in your organisation

This section contains information to support your organisation in the important aspects involved in employing bilingual staff, such as language skills, recruitment and organisational considerations.

These guidelines will assist you to make effective use of a valuable communication resource.

Two-way or three-way communication?

Every organisation must decide the best way to work with bilingual staff in the workplace and incorporate this within their policies, procedures and position descriptions. The first decision your organisation needs to make is whether bilingual staff will be expected to communicate in a two-way language encounter, a three-way language encounter, or both.

Language skills to consider when employing bilingual staff in your organisation

The method used to determine whether an applicant or staff member has the necessary language competence for bilingual work may depend on which language you want to assess. For example, for a recently arrived migrant you may want to assess English competence, whilst for a second generation migrant the issue may be their competence in their LOTE.

Your organisation should consider the types of language skills required within the role, and incorporate strategies into the recruitment process that will assist in evaluating the applicant's competence in these skills.

Every organisation must decide the best way to work with bilingual staff in the workplace and incorporate this within their policies, procedures and position descriptions.

Possible strategies are:

Assessing an applicant's English

In Victoria, English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching organisations utilise the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR), which rates a person's English proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing. The ISLPR describes common tasks that a person with a particular rating will be able to undertake (e.g. answer the phone, take notes, summarise). A person who has recently completed an English course in Victoria may be able to obtain their ISLPR rating from their English teacher or course provider.

The descriptions of language competence used in the ISLPR may be a useful guide for an organisation wishing to identify the language competencies required for a specific job. Concise descriptors of each rating scale can be found at www.islpr.org

Assessing the LOTE

In the absence of a LOTE assessment tool for bilingual staff, the ISLPR may be used to identify the language competencies required for the job. These can then be applied to the person's competence in the LOTE with the assistance of a competent LOTE speaker trained as an ISLPR assessor.

In the absence of a trained ISLPR assessor in the required LOTE, the ISLPR may be used with caution as a self assessment tool.

The level of education or qualifications attained outside Australia can give an indication of the person's language proficiency, although the standard and qualifications may not have an Australian equivalent. For example, someone who has studied at degree level in a particular LOTE would be expected to have competent reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in that language.

Previous experience is also an indicator but confirm the language used by the bilingual staff member in their previous employment, particularly overseas employment.

When contacting previous employers you can ask for an opinion of the applicant's language proficiency. If the employer and applicant do not speak the same language it may be difficult for the employer to assess language proficiency. Another option is asking for community referees to provide an opinion.

How a person uses their LOTE is another indicator of proficiency. If a person has spent most of their adult life in the country where the required language was spoken it may indicate the degree of language proficiency. However, the person may still be unable to discuss issues in a medical, legal or other technical field. Furthermore, if a person left their country of origin as a child, and only speaks that language at social functions, their LOTE proficiency may be inadequate for an occupational function.

Creating assessment standards for your organisation

Consider the nature of the communication encounters you would expect a role to include. Different roles require different skills so it is important to identify your needs prior to the interview and then include relevant questions. It is important to consider the speaking, listening, reading and writing skills necessary to carry out the work.

Tasks of bilingual staff

It is important that the tasks of bilingual staff are clear to both staff and clients alike and that position descriptions and workplans accurately reflect when it is appropriate to use the LOTE. For example, whether the bilingual staff member is only expected to work in a same language encounter in their occupation, or whether they will facilitate simple language communication between colleagues and clients.

Guidelines for recruiting, employing and working with bilingual staff in your organisation

Recruitment of bilingual staff

Bilingual staff are commonly recruited for a specific role in the organisation, not their language ability. For example, nurses are employed for their nursing skills, with their language skills considered an additional benefit. However, in some organisations, the demand for bilingual staff who speak particular languages mean that they recruit for the required language and then may or may not up-skill staff to perform the functions required of the position.

The Equal Opportunity Act 1995 SECT 19 states "An employer may limit the offering of employment to people with a particular attribute in relation to the provision of services for the promotion of the welfare or advancement of people with the same attribute, if those services can be provided most effectively by people with that attribute."

The range of attributes includes gender, language and cultural background.

To assist with effective recruitment it is important to consider the following.

Advertising for bilingual staff

Once the position description has been finalised, it is important to develop a targeted promotion strategy to ensure the position attracts the most suitable applicants. Possible considerations include:

Preparing advertisements

Some suggestions for wording that may be used in advertising for bilingual staff in mainstream media include:

- Persons who speak ... language are encouraged to apply;
- The ability to speak a relevant language other than English is desirable / essential; and/or
- Bilingual applicants are encouraged to apply.

Also consider including a statement that your organisation is an equal opportunity employer.

Mainstream media

If the position requires a high level of English language proficiency and literacy then conventional and common means of advertising could be used. You may consider placing the advertisement in the LOTE to attract the attention of relevant language speakers.

Ethnic media

Many ethnic communities have developed their own media networks which can include newspapers, radio and television programs, and the internet.

Word-of-mouth

Where the level of written literacy of an applicant is low, written information will be of limited use. Promoting a position through word-of-mouth may be an effective means of sourcing the most appropriate applicant.

Existing networks and key institutions

Consider using organisations that engage with people from the relevant communities such as Adult Multicultural Education Service (AMES), English language schools, TAFE English as a second language departments, migrant resource centres, ethno-specific organisations and religious institutions to assist you to promote the vacant position.

You can also advertise in school newsletters, through informal networks, other organisations or related sector information bulletins.

Different cultural communication styles can influence the capacity of an applicant to respond during an interview. Consider consulting with somebody from the same community about the structure of the interview and the type of questions.

The job application and interview process

The conventional job application and interview processes may be unknown to people who have experienced different work cultures. Additional assistance may be required to ensure that the applicants have the best opportunity to present their suitability for the position. Possible strategies include:

Provide applicants with guidelines regarding how to prepare a resume, address key selection criteria, fill in an application, and what to expect from an interview. Consider conducting an information session for potential candidates to:

- assist applicants to better understand the position and the organisation;
- enable the organisation to meet potential applicants and learn about the pool of applicants; and
- assist applicants to prepare the written application, if one is required.

For certain roles you could be flexible in how applicants can respond to the advertisement and consider an alternative to written applications, such as a verbal application.

Conducting the interview

Different cultural communication styles can influence the capacity of an applicant to respond during an interview. Consider consulting with somebody from the same community about the structure of the interview and the type of questions. To assess language capacity consider including a person that speaks the same language on the panel.

Traineeships

Offering traineeships will allow your organisation to train bilingual staff to the requirements of the position. Traineeships may be formal or informal. For example, Centrelink has implemented Customer Service Traineeships to recruit people from newly arrived African communities. The year long accredited traineeship program results in ongoing employment as a Customer Service Officer.

An example of an informal traineeship is the recruitment of Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs) at some government schools. In English Language Schools the role of MEAs is more diverse because of the recent arrival of the students. For students arriving in Australia through the Refugee and Humanitarian Migration Program, there may be little or no existing community group to support their settlement or provide interpreting services. In these situations the school will identify a person from this community and provide on-the-job training for them to perform the MEA role.

Guidelines for recruiting, employing and working with bilingual staff in your organisation

Organisational considerations

Bilingual staff play an important role in meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Regardless of which positions they are employed in, it is important to provide organisational support to bilingual staff to ensure that they are appropriately resourced to undertake their work.

Bilingual staff workload

Time taken out to facilitate a simple conversation outside of the bilingual staff member's main role must be reflected in their workplan. If not addressed it may create stress for the staff member and conflict in the workplace and may result in a high turnover of bilingual staff. Managers should regularly monitor the workload of their bilingual staff and structure their work accordingly.

Professional development and career advancement

Language proficiency can be acquired and enhanced. Organisations should consider requests for language assessment or language development as part of a professional development program.

It is important that bilingual staff are provided with a variety of work experiences and opportunities and are not confined to the narrow role of working between two language groups.

Remunerate bilingual staff accordingly

The employment of bilingual staff who use their LOTE as part of their work is a valuable asset to the organisation, and appropriate remuneration is recognition by the organisation that the language skills of staff are valued. The value of the remuneration needs to take into account the occupational, organisational and industry context. There are examples where this already occurs and the City of Darebin has been presented as one case example in these guidelines. Another example is the Victorian public service which provides a language allowance for staff that have passed the Language Aide test, assessed by NAATI and utilise their LOTE within their employment. For further details on the guidelines go to: <http://www.dvc.vic.gov.au>

Create a supportive work environment

The development of workplace policies and practices that encourage the use of LOTE in client interactions greatly enhance the recruitment and retention of bilingual staff.

Such policies may sit alongside your organisation's language services policy and may include statements such as *to respond effectively to clients with low English language proficiency we will endeavour to make the best use of the language resources within our organisation.*

Information on the language services your organisation delivers, including the role and limitations of bilingual staff and when to use a qualified interpreter or translator should form part of ongoing staff education.



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Health Sector Development

Other resources available from the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity & Health include:

Reports

- Language Services in Victoria's Health System: Perspectives of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities
- Language Services: Good Practice in the Victorian Health and Community Sector
- Consumer Participation and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities
- Engaging Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities in Physical Activity

Resources

- Assessing the Need for an Interpreter
- Bilingual Staff Roles and Organisational Supports
- Communicating with Clients with Low English Proficiency
- Culturally Inclusive Health Assessment
- Recruiting Bilingual Staff
- Reviewing Existing Translated Materials - Checklist
- Translating Health Promotion Materials into Community Languages
- A Practical Guide to CALD Consumer Participation
- Making Focus Groups Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate

To access electronic copies of any of these resources,
please visit www.ceh.org.au/resources/resbyceh.html

Training Workshops

We also offer organisational training workshops in the following areas:

- Consumer Participation and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities
- Cross Cultural Communication
- Culturally Inclusive Health Promotion
- Inclusive Health Assessment
- Valuing Cultural Diversity
- Strengthening Language Services
- Negotiating Between Health Beliefs

For further information on our training program, including our annual calendar of training,
please visit www.ceh.org.au/education



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