



Culturally inclusive practice

GENERAL INFORMATION FOLIO



Globalisation and internationalisation in higher education have required a renewed consideration of the student and staff experience in universities. This, in turn, requires a focus on practices to facilitate:

- effective and inclusive communication between students and staff
- a student friendly university environment
- inclusive responses to student expectations.

Some university cultures may still require assimilation from staff and students instead of accepting diversity and working proactively within a diverse setting. There are many features inherent in communication, the environment, and with regard to the interface between university culture and student

expectations, that enable this shift from assimilation to acceptance of diversity. These features are briefly examined here, as major factors contributing to effective inclusive practice within a culturally diverse community.

Many of the suggestions below reflect best practice in all situations, not just to encourage cultural inclusivity. However, they are also vital in situations which require cross-cultural competence and are therefore included. You may be an experienced practitioner, already incorporating the suggestions listed below in your work practices. In this case, the following suggestions may serve as a refresher. Also, it is always possible to improve our practices.

Communication

Academic forms of expression and administrative terminology can be quite unfamiliar to many students. International and Australian students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may need to be introduced to academic English and administrative terminology to help them operate effectively at the University.

Verbal/writing

Speak at a comfortable listening speed and volume.

Use pauses to establish a speaking pace that supports understanding.

Monitor speaking styles for clarity.

Face people when speaking rather than looking down at notes or facing a whiteboard or screen.

Support oral information with written and visual material (on the board, online, brochures, information sheets, handouts, etc.).

Avoid complicated, long sentences; be careful with or avoid culturally specific humour and irony; and do not use sarcasm.

Use humour positively and appropriately, to establish environments in which people are more able to express themselves.

If using Australian colloquial expressions such as 'she'll be right', explain them and/or provide a handout, and invite questions for clarification.

Non-verbal

Non-verbal communication is complex and no one is expected to be an expert. Examples include gestures, facial expressions, interpersonal distance, touch, eye contact and silence.

Indicate that you are giving the speaker your full attention. This may mean sitting up straight or adopting an open posture (not with crossed arms or legs), and leaning slightly toward the speaker.

Use open-handed gestures when inviting people to speak or join in, since in some cultures it is offensive to point.

Lack of eye contact should not be equated with lack of attention, as some cultural groups avoid direct eye contact as a sign of respect.

Find out whether people are comfortable with handshaking or sitting close together, as preferences for physical contact and proximity can vary.

In some cultures 'yes' or a nod of the head might mean 'I hear you' but not necessarily 'I understand you'.

Understanding

Make it a regular practice to check for understanding.

Encourage people to be comfortable in saying 'I do not understand'.

Give the listener the opportunity to repeat what you have said to check their understanding.

Make a point of speaking one-to-one or with a small group of people from the same culture to find out what each of you can do to improve understanding of what is read or heard.

Avoid or explain acronyms and euphemisms and jargon generally.

Explain discipline, faculty, school or university-specific concepts and terminology without ambiguity.

Introduce technical terms that are vital to learning early in a course. Consider involving staff and students in creating a chart of definitions that includes translations in languages appropriate to them.

Translating certain concepts can be difficult – what may seem clear to you may not translate into a comparable concept in another culture.

Make use of language and cultural resources specific to different language groups/cultures to increase inclusiveness for students and staff from those cultures.

Listening

Recognise that people who are using English as their second or third language can experience frustration and isolation as a result of not being able to express themselves fully in English. It can also cause frustration for the listener who may have difficulty understanding the speaker.

Listen to the words and try to picture what the speaker is saying, while being sensitive to underlying feelings, such as anger, grief or anxiety about speaking in English.

If you don't understand, say that you don't and ask the speaker to repeat what they said.

Do not pretend to understand.

Keep an open mind; avoid preconceived ideas of what the other person may say or do.

Summarise or paraphrase what they are saying, and if appropriate, reflect feelings by saying 'I sense you are feeling frustrated', or 'I understand what you need'.

Avoid interrupting before the speaker finishes a sentence or statement, unless you need clarification.

Environment

A person's first impression of the physical surroundings may impact on their level of confidence with free expression, social participation (both verbally and academically), and feeling safe at University.

Physical surroundings

Develop your own website where you talk about diversity and share information about origins and cross-cultural experiences.

Develop an overview of the diversity that exists within the work or student group, including cultural orientations, experiences, languages and interests for inclusion on a web page or during induction sessions.

Provide opportunities for staff and students to experience cultural settings at meetings, social events and celebrations through food, music, stories and 'traditional' attire.

Develop a contact list of support staff and services for international students.

See <http://www.transition.uwa.edu.au/welcome>
<http://lace.uwa.edu.au/>

Offer peer mentor schemes.

Offer a range of consultation systems, both formal and informal, to accommodate people from formal or informal cultures – e.g. drop-in sessions, arranged appointments or an online system for wide accessibility.

Set up an introduction system so that all students and staff can get to know something about you, their colleagues and the diversity of experience and people in the University.

See [TIPS Teaching and Learning: Designing Culturally Inclusive Environments](#).

Ground rules

Norms, rules, roles (includes behavioural expectations) and networks in varying cultural environments may differ significantly. Awareness of this, and establishing ground rules for discussing potentially sensitive issues in a classroom or workplace promotes an environment where mutual understanding is demonstrated. Ground rules could include politeness, taking turns, cooperation, punctuality, teamwork, confidentiality and knowledge of support systems.

Explain how students and colleagues discuss issues, especially of potentially sensitive issues e.g. a student being unable to do an exam on a particular day as it falls on the date of a religious ceremony.

Ask the student group or colleagues for feedback and ratification of ground rules.

See [TIPS Teaching and Learning: Small Groups and TIPS Teaching and Learning: Designing Culturally Inclusive Environments](#).

Create a 'Service Standards' or a 'Charter of Conduct' document for your area.

See [TIPS Leadership and Administration: Student Customer Service](#).

Social relationships

Positive social relationships are the basis of all harmonious productive education and work settings. It is important in these contexts for respectful relationships to be maintained and for people to work cooperatively to deal with incivilities.

Incivilities may arise even though ground rules have been established and ratified. Incivility includes rudeness, prejudice and neglecting the needs of individuals or groups and behaviours that cause others to feel intimidated, humiliated, degraded, undermined and/or distressed.

Deal with inappropriate behaviour early. Inappropriate behaviour can include:

- poor punctuality
- lack of preparation for or non-participation in classes and work teams
- hostile non-verbal communication
- excluding or isolating someone socially
- shouting or swearing.

Practicalities

Use the diverse experiences and perspectives of staff and students as a resource to enrich your working and learning environment. People are more willing to share when they take an active role and the learning is mutual.

Start a conversation, asking colleagues or students where they have travelled, lived, about the 'typical' work or study week in their cultures, and what their expectations, roles and experiences have been.

Offer people from diverse cultural communities an opportunity to talk informally or as guest lecturers/tutors.

Take responsibility for familiarising yourself with diverse cultures. Do not expect people from other backgrounds to always educate you about their culture and history, or to explain racism or sexism to you.

Try to identify assumptions that may be made about people. Physical appearances can be deceptive and identity with a particular culture does not necessarily mean that a person has grown up in that culture, e.g. second generation immigrant from CALD communities.

Avoid generalising behaviour (expecting particular culturally based behaviour or proficiency from an individual) or having stereotypical expectations of people (positive or negative) e.g. 'All Asian students are quiet in classes', 'All Asian students are good in science'.

University culture and student expectations

Individuals who are new to the University environment can find it difficult to get to know the culture of that university. There are many ways in which people already familiar with the organisational culture can extend support to people who are discovering new processes and expectations that are implicit within that organisation.

Classroom

Explain and clarify academic expectations and standards (to students) regarding written work in the Australian university context.

Outline behavioural and language expectations and the University policy on equal opportunity.

Clarify the format and purpose of the particular session type you are teaching and the type of participation expected.

Explain the written topic outlines, objectives and outcomes provided.

Teach appropriate citing and referencing.

Explain plagiarism, why it is inappropriate, and how to avoid it.

See: <http://www.teachingandlearning.uwa.edu.au/staffnet/policies/conduct>

Provide relevant information and resource sessions if necessary e.g. <http://www.library.uwa.edu.au/help/guides>

Make your assessment scheme quite clear. Let students know the expectations on communicating information and ideas and on language accuracy. Sometimes students can be anxious about being penalised for poor English expression.

Workplace

Diversity impacts on everything that the University does and needs to be considered in relation to all items on staff meeting agendas.

Set up cultural diversity and 'privilege' (see definition in GIF 1: [Culturally Inclusive Environment](#)) awareness sessions.

Inform staff about leave provisions for cultural holidays and religious celebrations and ensure conditions of service are inclusive.

Explain, clarify and check for understanding of responsibilities, reporting relationships and Australian workplace duties and standards as in:

- academic profiles
- position descriptions
- work manuals.

Ask staff to describe the contexts of their previous workplace culture to create learning opportunities about diversity, and to expose people to similarities and differences, and actively ease cross-cultural barriers.

Adjustment to change

People can face challenges and adjustment stresses when they live and work in a new culture. Also known as 'culture shock', the adjustment to change can be characterised by a series of phases that influence perceptions and responses to others and to events. Students might experience initial euphoria, followed by uncertainty and anger, or yearning for home. It is important to remember that staff or students who are from overseas, students and their families from rural or remote areas or from other Australian states and territories may experience this.

See GIF 3: [Understanding and Supporting People Experiencing Culture Shock](#)
See http://www.worldwide.edu/travel_planner/culture_shock.html

University support systems

- Inform and refer staff to the various staff support services available e.g. <http://www.staff.uwa.edu.au/home/tr>
- Inform and refer students to the various student support services available e.g. <http://www.uwa.edu.au/current/information>
- Inform and refer students to mentor/buddy schemes available e.g. <http://www.transition.uwa.edu.au/welcome/mentor>
<http://lace.uwa.edu.au/>
- Contact the International Centre
<http://www.international.uwa.edu.au/studentnet/intstudents>

