

Culturally Inclusive Environment

A culturally inclusive environment requires mutual respect, effective relationships, clear communication, explicit understandings about expectations and critical self-reflection.

In an inclusive environment, people of all cultural orientations can:

- freely express who they are, their own opinions and points of view.
- fully participate in teaching, learning, work and social activities.
- feel safe from abuse, harassment or unfair criticism.

A culturally inclusive university means that:

- individual students can participate fully in classes, aim to study better, aim to achieve better academic results, experience less stress and have enhanced career prospects.
- all staff can interact more fully with other staff and students and can extend and develop their own cultural awareness.
- the University as an organisation benefits from culturally diverse staff and students through exposure to alternate perspectives and experiences.

To establish an environment where diversity is genuinely valued, equity needs to be embedded into the core business of each working area within the university. Policies that dictate what we should or should not do are often described as ‘lip service’—meaning they exist to satisfy a legal requirement but are often not put into practice. Implementing such policies requires a shift in emphasis from the concept of equity being an ‘add-on’ policy to be an active and positive valuing of diversity in all that we do.

Inclusive practice

At UniSC, we understand inclusive practice to be the use of interactive strategies that acknowledge and value cultural diversity. Students and staff can benefit from culturally inclusive practice and experience diversity as a resource that enriches our teaching, learning, research, service provision and other work. If we don’t adopt inclusive practices, the result is that some individuals will feel marginalised, isolated, and discouraged. We may also miss valuable opportunities to learn about alternate experiences.

“At the base of intercultural understanding is a recognition of the ways in which two cultures resemble one another ... Resemblances usually surface through an examination of the differences”. Valdes 1986 p 49.

Inclusive practice enables all students and staff to get the maximum academic, personal and social benefit from their experience at the University of the Sunshine Coast. An inclusive environment on campus contributes to making UniSC a safe, enjoyable and productive place for everyone in the university community and can enhance our interactions with the wider community.

Positives...

- Acknowledge and welcome the presence of international students.
- Actively encourage their participation in class.
- Use activities that promote interaction between all students.
- Provide support resources to supplement their lectures.

Not as positive...

- Not being aware of the presence of international students.
- Not understanding the difficulties that some students have participating in class.
- Not including the value of 'other cultural' experience in the curriculum.

Enhancing cultural inclusiveness is an incremental, two-way process

Inclusive practice is dynamic. Cultural inclusiveness addresses and supports the needs of people from diverse cultures and values their unique contribution. It involves ongoing awareness raising, where negotiations and compromise may be necessary. At the same time, people from diverse cultures must be supported to understand the University's academic, administrative and social culture. Most of all, it is important to regard cross-cultural interactions as an opportunity for all of us to learn.

A good start for thinking about culture – your own and others' – is noticing what you find surprising, or perhaps disagreeable, about people's activities, attitudes and expectations. When this happens think about the cultural 'rules' being applied (Carroll 2000).

According to Lado (1957 p110), 'Culture is synonymous with "the ways of people". More often than not, the ways of people are praised by that same people while looked upon with suspicion or disapproval by the others, and often in both cases with surprisingly little understanding of what those ways really are and mean.'

The following quote shows how expectations about roles, responsibilities and relationships of teachers and students can vary.

"If the lecturer does not answer a student's question in class, but asks the other students what they think, in my country we would think that teacher is poorly qualified or lazy. But in Australia this way of not giving the answer ... is common in our class, even when the professor is our teacher." (3rd year Botany Student from Thailand) Ballard and Clanchy 1991 p1.

Respectful relationships

Respecting diversity entails more than tolerance. The term 'tolerance' implies that something must be endured, or 'put up with' – like the unpleasant side effects of a medication. When genuine acknowledgement, appreciation of, and interest in diversity is experienced, respectful relationships develop. Apart from avoiding the occurrence of disrespectful behaviours, engaging in respectful relationships means demonstrating a positive appreciation of people and their cultural values.

Respectful relationships extend beyond individuals to include aspects of special significance to particular cultures. For example, in the case of Indigenous Australians, this includes respecting their history of Australia, which is an alternate perspective to 'white' history. It also means respecting guardianship of the lands on which UniSC campuses are situated.

Cultural diversity

Cultural diversity is commonly interpreted in relation to ethnicity. However, the term should be understood within a broader context where it recognises the unique attributes of all persons.

The CDIP Toolkit will focus initially on the ethnic, religious and language dimensions of cultural diversity. It is also important to acknowledge the various elements of Australian cultures, including Indigenous Australian people's cultures, when understanding cultural diversity. Often 'cultural diversity' is considered only in the context of people from countries outside of Australia. Despite the presence of the term 'race' in everyday language, and its use in various policies and statements referred to throughout this toolkit, the new Macquarie ABC Dictionary under 'usage' of the term states: "Because the 19th century classification of humans into distinct races has been challenged scientifically, and has been misused, many now prefer to avoid this term when referring to a group of humans, and to replace it with another term such as 'peoples' or 'community'."

References and resources

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