

Student Service

When working in student service areas, there are many opportunities for interaction with people from diverse cultures.

Often, the expectation of service users is to have an administrative/financial need or problem addressed and solved – immediately. The intention of student services support officers is to do the best they can given the circumstances involved. When expectations and intentions of students and staff differ, reaching a productive outcome becomes challenging. Identifying patterns and raising awareness of cross-cultural barriers can assist people to understand and meet expectations. Although it is impossible to understand every different culture's practices and norms, having an open mind, respect and a positive regard for others is important.

Issues with Cross-Cultural Student Service

A common observation when assisting people from alternate cultures is some people's reluctance to ask questions. There are many reasons contributing to the hesitancy to speak freely. Some people might not understand the need to ask, or may feel uncomfortable in doing so because they believe it is rude or because they lack the confidence to use English publicly. Others may have difficulty asking because in their culture they are accustomed to being told everything on a 'need to know' basis. They may assume they have been given all the information they require, and therefore will not ask for more.

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds have reported that sometimes:

- finding the appropriate words in English is a struggle;
- explaining their needs in clear sentences at a particular moment is difficult;
- they feel self-conscious about their accent.

In addition, students from diverse cultures have reported feeling 'invisible' or not valued by their service providers. This is particularly felt when people:

- do not listen to or understand what is said;
- assume that administrative policies and practices provide for all staff and students equitably;

- do not attend to issues;
- do not demonstrate a willingness to investigate a problem further.

Furthermore, in seeking 'the familiar', people tend to avoid interacting with Student Services, and rely on information or sometimes misinformation from their friends or 'peer group'.

Being Self-aware

Identifying and understanding our own origins, cultural values and manners of communication help us to make meaningful comparisons with cultures other than our own.

Understanding how cultures vary does not guarantee a motivation or willingness to incorporate diversity into our everyday work. We may not agree with particular work styles, and reject them in favour of 'tried and true' methods.

However, acting differently once the cultures and practices are acknowledged and respected provides the opportunity to learn and benefit from alternate practices.

"For a business to succeed in a multicultural or international environment, it has to be able to identify and quantify the values, beliefs, expectations and ways of doing business of everybody involved." Berger (1996, p14).

Unfortunately, people from diverse cultures are often 'defined' by their initial reactions to university staff and this can lead to a communication gulf for future interactions.

Initial silence can contribute to poor basic conceptual understanding of administrative obligations at a critical point in the academic year. This might result in problems not being brought to the attention of staff until it is even more difficult to help students to successfully manage the situation.

Inclusive practices and cultural values should be embraced in administration policies and procedures and organisational structures. While it is easy to agree with general principles of inclusive practice that embrace cultural diversity, knowing what to do to be 'inclusive' in practice can be complex.

"Obviously no one can learn everything about all cultures – no one knows everything about one's own culture – but even rather sweeping generalities, so long as they are not false, may be a help, if one avoids the pitfall of stereotyping and does not expect all members of a culture to fit the generality"

Valdes 1986, p49

TIPS

Case Study

Establishing clear expectations in the workplace

Abaan Bakar is 29 and has a university degree. He is married with three children under 6 years of age, and had a permanent government job in Malaysia with responsibility for 200 staff.

Abaan Bakar's wife, Rafidah started a Masters Course in History at an Australian university in 2003. Abaan Bakar resigned his job in Malaysia and travelled with his family to Australia, planning to get work and support his family while Rafidah studied.

Six months after arriving in Australia, he started casual work doing filing in an office. After three days, Abaan Bakar had not taken a single meal break. He went home tired and hungry, and told his wife that he hadn't been told to take a break, so he didn't take one.

In this Australian work area, employees casually advise their supervisor when taking time for lunch – but in his culture, Abaan Bakar's employees always waited for him to tell them when to have a break. He feels it is disrespectful to tell his supervisor that he wants to take a break. For the whole week, Abaan Bakar ate his lunch before he started work at 9am, and did not eat again until he went home for dinner.

- What expectations are there of Abaan Bakar?
- How could Abaan Bakar feel more comfortable at work?
- What are the 'cultural rules' that Abaan Bakar is following?
- What 'cultural rules' are his colleagues following?
- If staff noticed that Abaan Bakar wasn't taking lunch breaks, what could they do?
- Even when workloads are high, what opportunities are there to be inclusive in the workplace?

Communication

"Language not only describes, but constitutes the ways in which we understand educational processes and events. The vocabularies we use are sedimented within a cultural belief system; in drawing upon the vocabularies of a particular culture, we draw upon the meanings contained in words. Language as a cultural sign system, has a part in influencing our actions and in determining how we make sense of our observations and experience." (Korn, 2001, p74).

Communicating with people from CALD backgrounds

- Check the environment e.g. for machine or group noise that may interfere with communication.
- Use friendly non-verbal communication, such as smiling or leaning towards someone when they are speaking.
- Avoid Australian jargon when responding to enquiries e.g. 'She'll be right', or 'It's all sorted!'.
- Take care when using humour, as it may be misunderstood in another context.
- Familiarise yourself with the elements of culture shock and adjustment stages. **See General Information Folio 4: Understanding and Supporting People Experiencing Culture Shock** <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip>
- Inform staff and students of available services and resources rather than expecting that they already know.
- Provide brochures in different languages.
- Clearly signpost service areas.
- Confirm understanding by seeking verbal acknowledgement and, if necessary, writing information down.

Communicating with Indigenous staff and students

The physical and intellectual environment of a university is not culturally neutral.

- Participate in workshops that provide cultural, historical, political, social and contemporary contexts of Indigenous Australia to raise cultural awareness and responsiveness.
- Invite Indigenous staff and/or community members to meetings or social gatherings to pass on knowledge first hand.
- Display signs and/or verbally acknowledge that La Trobe is on Indigenous land.
- Ask Indigenous students/staff members how they prefer to be addressed.
- Use consistent terminology about Indigenous peoples.
- Consult with Indigenous students, staff and La Trobe Indigenous Australian Student Support Units about how to make the University more friendly to Indigenous Australians.
- Seek advice from La Trobe Indigenous Australian Student Support Units on cultural protocols or considerations when consulting with Indigenous communities. **See General Information Guide 5: Appropriate Terminology, Indigenous Australian Peoples.** <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/cdip/>

Communicating via a telephone

- Answer the phone with a smile – smiles can be heard!
- Speak slowly and clearly. Often repeating similar information daily can cause words to run into one another.
- Write down the caller's name and use their name during the conversation.
- Avoid doing something else while you are on the phone – callers soon notice when your attention is elsewhere, and this inhibits you focusing on what you are being told.
- Speak positively – instead of saying 'I don't know', try 'Let me check that for you'.
- When transferring a call, make sure the call is picked up before disconnecting your caller – don't send people to voice mail unless your caller is prepared.



Reflecting

INDICATE: ▶ Highly Evident = 5 Somewhat Evident = 3
Hardly Evident = 1 Not evident = 0

After reviewing my responses to these areas and the items within them, the key areas I would like to work on are:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Creating a 'student service standards' is one way the work area can provide an opportunity to discuss inclusiveness, diversity, student service issues, and clarify expectations made of staff.

You can use the information provided in this TIPS sheet to review existing or create new standards that encourage, enhance and emphasise inclusive practice.

- Use this exercise to reflect on your own current work practices
- Use this exercise to reflect on your team's current work practices

What evidence do I have that my approach is effective?

To what extent do I...

Clarify (to students) the purpose of my service area, and its relationship to other sections of the University? 5 3 1 0

Take an interest in a culture that is unlike my own, and learn/gain from it? 5 3 1 0

Consider equity issues and make adjustments to existing policy and practice? 5 3 1 0

Expect people from alternative cultures to learn how to 'fit in' (consciously or not)? 5 3 1 0

Use appropriate terminology consistently? 5 3 1 0

Ignore intercultural communication barriers in the hope that they 'go away'? 5 3 1 0

Reflect on my own cultural sensitivity and awareness? 5 3 1 0

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'For a business to succeed in a multicultural or international environment, it has to be able to identify and quantify the values, beliefs, expectations business of everybody involved.'

Berger 1996, p14

What evidence do I have that my approach is effective?

To what extent do I...

Explain the workplace culture to new staff? 5 3 1 0

Create a safe environment and encourage people to speak if they have questions? 5 3 1 0

Consult with cultural groups and Indigenous Centres about how to make the work area a more inclusive place? 5 3 1 0

Communicate effectively with students for whom English is a second or subsequent language? 5 3 1 0

Adapt written information, brochures and forms to be culturally inclusive? 5 3 1 0

Provide support to students who are adjusting to new systems and processes? 5 3 1 0

Consider how the inclusion of Indigenous ideologies and cultures sit within existing or future policies and practices? 5 3 1 0

References and Further Resources

Korn, C. (2001). The Language of Teaching and the Vocabularies of Possibility; TAB00. *The Journal of Culture and Education*, 5(1).

Berger, M. (1996). *Cross-Cultural Team Building: Guidelines for More Effective Communication and Negotiation*. McGraw-Hill, England

Valdes, J.M. (1986). *Culture Bound*. Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press.