Culturally Inclusive Environment

Cultural diversity and the Guidelines on Learning

The UNSW Guidelines on Learning (a framework to inform teaching at UNSW) uphold the importance of embracing cultural diversity. They explicitly state the need to embrace different cultures and accommodate diverse educational backgrounds in the student body.

**Guideline 8** reads: *Acknowledge, value and draw on the diversity of students' experiences in learning and teaching approaches and activities.*

And **Guideline 9**: *Use multiple teaching methods and modes of instruction (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and read/write). Students learn in different ways.*

Requirements of a culturally inclusive university

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.

In a culturally inclusive university:

- **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 that 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 an active and positive valuing of diversity in all that we do.

The Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Practice (CDIP) Toolkit has been developed to help members of the UNSW community

- translate policies that are related to inclusiveness,
- value cultural diversity in everyday practice.

A broader idea of cultural diversity

Cultural diversity is commonly interpreted in relation to ethnicity. More broadly, it recognises the unique attributes of all persons.

The CDIP Toolkit focuses 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 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 Macquarie 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".

Inclusive practice

At UNSW, inclusive practice is 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, some individuals will feel marginalised, isolated and discouraged. We may also miss valuable opportunities to learn about alternative 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, 49)

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

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 UNSW 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 your own and others' culture 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, 110):

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, cited in Ballard and Clanchy, 1991, 1.)

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 acknowledgment, 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 alternative perspective on "white" history.

References


