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# Cross Cultural Awareness and Communication

## INTRODUCTION

Communicating across cultures can be a difficult experience. All successful communication results from one person understanding the meaning and intention of what another person has said. The skills associated with effective and rewarding cross-cultural communication can seem elusive to many people who lack experience of this form of interaction. The information contained in this fact sheet is designed to initiate and/or guide your cross-cultural experiences. The resources and contacts listed are intended as a starting point for further learning.

## WHO ARE CALD STUDENTS?

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students are not international students – they are citizens or permanent residents of Australia. Some are voluntary migrants, while others have entered Australia on a Humanitarian Visa after being a refugee.

CALD students come from many countries and represent many cultures and languages. The University of Tasmania currently has significant numbers of students enrolled who come from Chile, China, Korea, Iraq, India, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran, Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, Zimbabwe as well as small numbers of students from other countries. These students bring with them a vast array of life experiences and useful perspectives on the world around us. Many have fled violent civil wars, religious or political persecution or natural disasters like famine and drought. Many have experienced the worst that human nature can offer, yet bring enthusiasm and optimism to their study and the life of the University.

## WHO ARE HUMANITARIAN ENTRANT STUDENTS?

Humanitarian entrant students are people who have resettled in Australia after being a refugee. They enter Australia as permanent residents and can only access the services available to the general student population.

A refugee is any person who has left their country because of the experience or fear of violence, religious persecution, political unrest or natural disasters, and has no hope of returning to that country. There are currently 44 million refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide. Australia is one of only 22 nations accepting resettlement of refugees, with an annual refugee resettlement commitment ~ 13-14,000 each year.

From 2004-2010 300 refugees on average are resettled in Tasmania each year. As many entrants are young adults and teenagers looking to make the most of the educational opportunities in Australia this has led to a sizeable UTAS population at approximately 300 students, which has increased sharply from 2004, but has remained fairly stable with a trend of low growth over 2010-11. They have all been refugees for extended periods and have experienced or witnessed extended periods of danger and privation, mostly during protracted civil wars. They have been subjected to forced dislocation, squalor, malnutrition, disease, limited access to clean water and sanitation and a lack of educational opportunities.

## WHAT DO CALD STUDENTS NEED?

- acknowledgement of their experiences;
- acknowledgement of different learning styles;
- acknowledgement of their reality e.g. lack of access to computers, language issues etc.;
- acknowledgement of the value of their experiences to the University community;
- assistance to achieve their potential including skill development, cultural adjustment, English language proficiency, computer literacy, information literacy etc.;
- to understand what is expected of them and what they can expect of the University; and,
- support in facing feelings of isolation and uncertainty and in dealing with racism.

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communication, actions, customs, beliefs, values and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group. It reflects the norms and values of a given society and constitutes, to a large extent, the way in which individuals in that society view the world.

Some of the elements of culture include:

- language;
- dress and appearance;
- food and eating habits;
- music and dance;
- time and time-consciousness;
- interpersonal relationships; and,
- beliefs and attitudes.

Some other definitions that are useful when considering cultural difference include:

- **Acculturation** – the process of adapting to or adopting a different culture.
- **Ethnic** – refers to membership of a group linked by race, nationality, language or a common cultural heritage.

- **Race** – a socially defined population that is derived from distinguishable physical characteristics.
- **Stereotype** – the notion that all people from a given group are the same.

Some of the most common cultural differences relate to the use of names – how and why people are named and how they are addressed in certain situations. An example is placing the family name first when addressing someone in many collectivist cultures. Greetings such as handshakes, interaction between men and women, family structures, signs of respect, attitudes to education, and body language, also play central roles in most cultures, and are where most common misunderstandings occur. For example in many African and Asian cultures, avoidance of eye contact can indicate respect rather than discomfort or a lack of interest.

In many cultures, it is not usual to ask questions of teachers and service providers. However, when issues are raised, the expectations of both parties will often differ in relation to acceptable outcomes and the level of concern displayed. In fact, many CALD students tend to rely on members of their own community for information about University matters.

## WHY IS COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES SO DIFFICULT?

More than 80% of the world's people live in societies that are collectivist in nature. Those living in Western societies live in societies that are individualist in nature. This is a fundamental difference that has the potential to create constant misunderstanding and, therefore, miscommunication.

The comparison provided in the table on the following page is a useful starting point for interpreting those fundamental differences as they arise.

Remembering that we are all human beings driven by the same emotions, instincts and ambitions may also help us to see cultural difference as something that is on the surface and not so threatening.

## USEFUL TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES

The following tips are a starting point for cross-cultural communication at UTAS. Some of the many useful websites providing variations and more detail are listed in the resources section of this fact sheet. Feel free to contact a CALD Support Officer if you have a particular issue.

- Be complete, explicit and pay attention to the other person's response.
- Be alert for different meanings.
- Avoid metaphors, colloquialisms and jargon. Define any jargon that you must use.
- Attempt to be clear while avoiding the over-simplification of terms as it may seem insulting.
- If a word or concept is not understood, re-word your thoughts. Do not repeat it or increase your volume as if the listener has a hearing problem.
- Paraphrase and seek verification of understanding. Ask the listener to confirm information or directions in their own words.
- Acknowledge cultural differences without bias and be persistent. When you have difficulty, talk about it together.
- Be sensitive to cultural stands on social issues like gender roles and drug use.
- Do not ask questions that you would not or could not answer yourself.
- Research the cultural background of the person, if possible.
- Withhold judgment and set your assumptions aside. Study and evaluate cultural generalisations. Understand that even valid generalisations must be carefully considered when applied to individuals.
- Always provide a why. Cultural patterns or rules may seem arbitrary if unexplained. If a student is uncomfortable with a decision or situation, explaining why is important, particularly if the issue is non-negotiable.
- Take the risk! Always remember that you will make mistakes as you learn.

## PARTICULAR ISSUES IN A UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

- *Unarticulated expectations*: in an internationalised university we can no longer expect students to know what is expected of them as a student or what the role of a lecturer, tutor, support worker etc. are at the start of their time here. Be explicit about the most important things you expect from a student/client and the boundaries of your role at the start to avoid complications due to a clash of differing expectations.
- *Oral/hierarchical cultures and written/individualist cultures*: due to differences in the mode of communication or the amount students expect to be led by a teacher/staff member, students from many cultures will be expecting teachers and staff to tell them everything they need to know. Our culture is paper/internet based and assumes a high degree of independence from our learners. Be aware of this difference and pre-empt difficulties by referring student explicitly to written materials.
- *Critical thinking and writing styles*: due to the value we place on individual, critical thought students are asked to criticise authorities from first year. This can be difficult and confronting for students used to absorbing and retelling knowledge from an authority figure. Make this expectation explicit and explain why it is central to a western university education. Describing the processes of critical thinking (for example, what kind of questions should students ask of a text), and providing annotated models of good writing are helpful.
- *Referencing and plagiarism*: our accent on individual ownership and our access to multiple sources of information make referencing a necessity and plagiarism a crime. This is very different to collectivist cultures where knowledge viewed as property of the group or where few resources make referencing less important. Don't assume students will know the importance of these issues, draw explicit reference to them as often as practicable and treat early offences as opportunities for detailed instruction around these issues rather than punishment if possible within the rules.

- *Embedded cultural knowledge in unit materials:* very difficult to see from within the prevalent cultural group, our course materials abound in cultural references. Try to explain those not covered in lectures, particularly if they have bearing on assessment pieces.
- *English language proficiency:* all students will need to develop their English language proficiency in order to achieve the graduate outcomes related to communication. For students who have English as an additional language, this can be a particular challenge. Explanation of this expectation and early referral to support where necessary are valuable. Collaboration between academic staff and learning support staff can encourage students to take up the available support

## SUGGESTIONS FOR CALD STUDENTS

Communicating across cultures presents the same problems for CALD students as it does for other people in the University. The tips in this fact sheet are as useful for CALD students as for the broader University community. It is also good to keep the following points in mind:

- If you are having difficulty communicating with academic staff or fellow students, seek help from your CALD (details below) or faculty Student Adviser.
- Many people choose not to interact with you because they do not want to offend you. Take the risk to talk to initiate conversation, once people know you are just like them they will be much more likely to talk with you.
- We all have the same feelings of apprehension in unfamiliar circumstances – many students in your classes will be feeling just as nervous as you.
- If people express a wish to hear your story, be prepared to tell only those parts of it that you are comfortable talking about.

## RESOURCES

There are many people and organisations that can help if you are finding communication across cultures difficult, or if you are interested to know more. These include:

- The Student Centre
- The Migrant Resource Centre in your city
- Multicultural Tasmania
- The Refugee Council of Australia

Useful web-based resources include the following recommended sites:

[www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home) the UNHCR site provides a good source of accurate statistics and human stories about global trends in humanitarian resettlement

[www.refugeecouncil.org.au/](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/) provides information and resources on Australia's refugee resettlement programs.

[www.teaching-learning.utas.edu.au](http://www.teaching-learning.utas.edu.au) provides access to a range of teaching and learning resources including inclusive teaching practice and TILT programs.

[www.tlu.fbe.unimelb.edu.au/tutortraining/diversity.html](http://www.tlu.fbe.unimelb.edu.au/tutortraining/diversity.html) for information on diversity and inclusive practice in teaching.

[www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocslid/resources/briefing\\_papers](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocslid/resources/briefing_papers) for suggestions on teaching international students effectively.

[www.unimelb.edu.au/diversity/downloads/inclusive%20practice.pdf](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/diversity/downloads/inclusive%20practice.pdf) for suggestions on inclusive practice in teaching, learning and assessment.

Dunworth, K & Briguglio, C, 2011, *Teaching students who have who have English as an additional language: A handbook for academic sta in higher education*, HERDSA, Milperra NSW. Available to order online at [www.herdsa.org.au](http://www.herdsa.org.au)

## CONTACTS

For more information or assistance, please contact one of the CALD Support Officers employed by the University.

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