

# Theory Into Practice Strategies: Student Service

## Leadership and Administration

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 staff 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.

'Obviously no one can learn everything about all cultures – no one knows everything about one's own culture – 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 p 49).

## Issues with cross-cultural student service

A common observation when assisting people from other 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. For an example of an inclusive policy, refer to the Policy on Diversity and Inclusiveness at:

[http://www.newcastle.edu.au/policy/academic/general/diversity\\_inclusiveness.pdf](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/policy/academic/general/diversity_inclusiveness.pdf)

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.



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## Case study

### Establishing clear expectations in the workplace.

Abu 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.

Abu Bakar's wife, Rafidah started a Masters Course in History at an Australian university in 2003. Abu 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, Abu 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, Abu 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, Abu 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 Abu Bakar?
- How could Abu Bakar feel more comfortable at work?
- What are the 'cultural rules' that Abu Bakar is following?
- What 'cultural rules' are his colleagues following?
- If staff noticed that Abu 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 eg 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 eg '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
- 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

- 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 University of Newcastle is located on land of the traditional Indigenous owners
- Ask Indigenous students/staff members how they prefer to be addressed
- Use consistent terminology about Indigenous peoples
- Consult with Indigenous students and staff about how to make the University more friendly to Indigenous Australians
- Seek advice on cultural protocols or considerations when consulting with Indigenous communities

### 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

After reviewing my responses to these areas and the items within them, the key area(s) I would like to work on is/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. For example:

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- We undertake to be accessible
- Our office is open for business from 9.00am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday
- We cover our absences either by reliable call redirection to a colleague or by the use of voicemail, with a message that clearly indicates the likely timeframe for a return call
- We deal directly with clients wherever possible, minimising the use of intermediaries to convey messages
- Where possible we make sure all clients with whom we deal on a regular basis personally know us

- We deal with enquiries promptly
- We acknowledge telephone calls within 24 hours
- If we cannot deal with an issue immediately, we explain why and tell the client when he/she can expect an answer
- We strive to deal with telephone enquiries within 36 hours and written correspondences within 4 days
- No issue (verbal or written) within our control remains unresolved for more than one week without discussion with the client
- We aim to get it right
- We give clear and comprehensive advice
- We explain to our clients the reasons for our advice/decision
- If uncertain we seek advice from a colleague
- But, what if we get it wrong?
- We apologise to the client and solve the problem as soon as possible
- We treat clients with courtesy
- We answer the telephone with a greeting; we always tell the caller to whom he/she is speaking
- We strive for a tone that is business-like but friendly in our written work
- We avoid the use of unnecessary jargon
- We do not quote policies and practices without explaining the rationale behind them
- We follow an agreed protocol in all of our verbal communications  
November 2000

### References and further resources.

Korn, C. (2001). The Language of Teaching and the Vocabularies of Possibility; TABOO The Journal of Culture and Education, 5(1) Spring-Summer 2001

Berger, M. (1996). Cross-Cultural Team Building: Guidelines for More Effective Communication and Negotiation. McGraw-Hill, England Staff and Students' Perspectives Study - 2002.

Inclusive Language Guidelines  
<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/policylibrary/000797.html>

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



## Use this exercise to reflect on your own current work practices

<b>To what extent do I?</b> <input type="checkbox"/> 5 Highly evident <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Somewhat evident <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Hardly evident <input type="checkbox"/> 0 Not evident	<b>What evidence do I have that my approach is effective?</b>
Clarify (to students) the purpose of my service area, and its relationship to other sections of the university? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Take an interest in a culture that is unlike my own, and learn/gain from it? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Consider equity issues and make adjustments to existing policy and practice <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Expect people from alternate cultures to learn how to 'fit in' (consciously or not)? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Use appropriate terminology consistently? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Ignore intercultural communication barriers in the hope that they 'go away'? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Reflect on my own cultural sensitivity and awareness? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Explain the workplace culture to new staff? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Create a safe environment and encourage people to speak if they have questions? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Consult with cultural groups about how to make the work area a more inclusive place? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Communicate effectively with students for whom English is a second or subsequent language? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Adapt written information brochures and forms to be culturally inclusive? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Provide support for students who are adjusting to new systems and processes? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Consider how the inclusion of Indigenous ideologies and cultures sit within existing or future policies and practices? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	