

Diversity Statement

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Creating equal opportunities and an unbiased environment is what I strive for in any place where I teach or work. Discrimination based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, culture or sexual orientation brings no good to anyone in society.. As a teacher or mentor, I have always believed in creating a learning conducive environment for everyone without any bias. As an educator, it is essential to be unbiased but also mindful of the sensitivities of the under-represented minorities (URM). As an educator who promotes diversity, there are two important aspects that I have always employed while teaching: Creating a feeling of togetherness among the different sets of students (both majority and minority) so as to make them feel like equals. Always be sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of students and avoid any sort of discrepancies or biased statements that would hurt the URMs.

One of my strongest beliefs is that your childhood education, life experiences determine your ethics, values and mindset. Being born in India, where we can observe 'Unity in Diversity' helped in shaping an equality or unbiased mindset. 'Unity in Diversity' is one of the pioneering pillars of India's democracy whereby people of diverse religions, cultures, castes, sects, etc. live together with tolerance for one another and exhibit unity. Values and ethics passed through family and education have always taught me equality. Being in a hostel with other students during my undergraduate further helped to strengthen my mindset on diversity. In a hostel, all students would be different based on variations in physical qualities, skin colour, castes, creed, cultural and religious traditions, etc. But hostels created a genuine feeling of oneness among me and friends even though we were brought up in different conditions. Creating such an environment where everyone is treated as equals provides a positive environment for all students which I strive to create as a teacher.

Singapore provides a multi-racial and ethnic environment, and identifies four official languages, namely, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and English. Similar to India, I was able to interact and work with students, researchers, and faculties from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Being of Tamil origin and ability to speak the language, I always did not feel out of place in Singapore. As I could speak Tamil (mother tongue) and English, I always helped other international students who couldn't speak the language and tried to orient new students to Nanyang Technological University (NTU)'s environment. In NTU, most international students (graduate and postgraduate), exchange students, research interns might not get university accommodation during their stay. Staying in an apartment just outside the campus, my friends and I tried to provide temporary accommodation for these students and help them to get acquainted with the campus. Due to this, I had the opportunity to meet and interact with several students from different ethnicities and races, which helped me gain insights on their cultural backgrounds and preferences. My interest in music, movies, and sports helped me to meet new people and make friends. Due to these interests, I had taken up the position of treasurer of the social and recreation team of Graduate Student Club of NTU. As a way of promoting togetherness among students, we had conducted several cultural and festival programs for all students. As a teacher and research mentor, I made sure to understand my student's mindset towards learning and research. I had an open office hour policy and any student could approach me at any time with any of their concerns. As a part of teaching, I also made sure of having regular one-on-one conversations with students and

tried to promote diversity among them.

As a researcher, I have always believed in maintaining diversity and always ensured ethics and integrity are maintained in my research. As a postdoctoral research fellow, I had worked on Nadine social humanoid robot [1, 2] and virtual humans. Due to the human appearance, it had become imperative for us to make Nadine to be sensitive to URM's in her answers and behaviors. Being one of the most realistic humanoid robots, Nadine was very well-known and had been used in research with many multinational companies [3]. Also, she goes to several conferences of companies where she is expected to interact socially. During the setup of Nadine, I would meet and interact with people from diverse backgrounds and make sure Nadine is sensitive to these differences. For instance, when Indian prime minister visited NTU, Singapore, [4] Nadine had met him and we had to make modifications. It was essential for her to speak in Hindi, do a namaste gesture (a welcome gesture in Indian culture). Similarly, when pitching Chloe (virtual human) to a Malaysian client, we modified her appearance and language according to Malay traditions. Incorporating such cultural cues within the embodiments and AI engine has always been an essential part of my research solutions as it is imperative to be free from any bias. Apart from changing overall AI, it was also necessary to remove bias in specific modules of AI. One such example was facial emotion recognition. To make sure the model was not biased, we retrained the model with faces of different races and ethnicities. I always made sure any computer vision and natural language processing model used was free of bias.

Overall, I have always believed in promoting diversity in my teaching or learning. As a teacher or research mentor, I have always wanted to create an equal learning and teaching environment and create a feeling of togetherness among my students. In the future, I would see my teaching and research group promoting diversity and be able to offer equal opportunities to every student.

References

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