Inclusive language at RMIT

Guide

Inclusive Language at RMIT

RMIT is committed to ensuring an equitable and inclusive experience for staff and students, reflected through our organisational value of 'Inclusion.'

Language is critical to inclusion. It can be affirming and allow us to feel seen, or it can make us feel excluded and that we don't belong – even when we don't intend to.

Creating and maintaining an inclusive culture is everybody's responsibility, and language is a way in which we can all make RMIT a better place for all staff, students, and community.

This guide has been designed for RMIT staff and students and is adapted from resources produced by Diversity Council of Australia, the Victorian Government, and others (a full list is available at the end of the document).

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1. Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples

RMIT acknowledges that we live, work, and participate in the production of knowledge on the unceded lands of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. RMIT's City, Brunswick and Bundoora campuses and the Point Cook site are on the traditional lands of the Kulin nation. The Hamilton site is on traditional lands of the Gundjitmara.

Bundjil's Statement has been developed to deepen the RMIT community's ngarn-go (understandings) of how to live and work lawfully and respectfully on the Kulin Nation. Learn more about our commitment: https://www.rmit.edu.au/staff/our-rmit/indigenous-engagement/bundjil-statement

Respectful and culturally aware communication is one way that all staff can support this commitment.

1.1. Appropriate language and terminology

An inclusive collective term for Indigenous Australians is 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples'. This term should always be written in its entirety, and never abbreviated (eg, 'ATSI').

If you are speaking to or about an individual, it is respectful to be as specific as possible about their cultural identity and or language group. Ask the person for guidance and/or consult with local

Artwork 'Luwaytini' by Mark Cleaver, Palawa

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Be aware that some Indigenous Australians may be connected with their culture but not know their specific language or cultural group due to being a child of, or related to a child of, the Stolen Generations and/or being displaced.

1.2. Acknowledge sovereignty

As yet, no treaty exists between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and the government of Australia. The unceded sovereignty should be acknowledged by describing the arrival of the British and Europeans as an invasion, and the continued occupation of the land as *colonisation*.

1.3. Follow RMIT Protocols

Staff organising high profile public events should organise a formal Welcome to Country. Contact the Wurundjeri Council for events on the city, Brunswick, and Bundoora campuses.

Less formal events and gatherings should have an Acknowledgement of Country.

This is a statement that recognises the Traditional Owners of the land. An Acknowledgment is a simple way to recognise and show respect to shared connection through place to the oldest continuing cultures on earth. Ideally an Acknowledgement should be given any time people gather to conduct RMIT business.

1.4. Professional Development Opportunities

RMIT offers professional development sessions for staff to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, culture and heritage. Look for the learning pathway on Workday: *Reconciliation: racism and cultural safety* and keep an eye on the *On Country* website for student activities.

2. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

The term culturally and linguistically diverse is a way of describing communities and individuals for whom English is not their first language, or the language they use with their family and friends, and/or those who have a background that is not Anglo-Saxon. We use this term to encompass the vast diversity that exists within a community in relation to language, ethnic background, heritage, ancestry, nationality, and culture including dress, traditions, food, art, and religion (AIA 2021). While this terminology is quite established from a governmental or organisational perspective, it's important to remember that this terminology may not resonate with all – it's best to avoid using the acronym CALD unless you're speaking to a specialist audience (AIA 2021).

2.1 Naming-conventions

Many naming systems around the world differ from those used in English-speaking countries. This is important to remember when working with students and colleagues in an interpersonal setting, but also in relation to data and records.

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Some examples of this may include:

- Chinese naming conventions arrange names as follows: [FAMILY NAME] [given name]. For example, *ZHANG Chen* (male) and *WANG Xiu* (female), and there are no spaces between a person's family name and given name when written in Chinese characters, e.g., 张晨 (ZHANG Chen).
- The Western concept of having a 'first name', 'middle name' and 'family name' is not followed in Indonesia. Under Indonesian naming conventions, all components of a name are considered part of a single given name that is their unique personal identifier, i.e. [personal name].

SBS's Cultural Atlas can provide detailed information of naming conventions from cultures around the world.

2.2 Name Pronunciation

Correctly pronouncing a person's name is important to a sense of inclusion. To support this, staff can now add their phonetic pronunciation to their Workday profile using Workday's Change My Name Pronunciation task.

View the Add your name pronunciation to your profile quick reference guide for instructions on how to add this information to your profile. Once added, it will be visible to all Workday users.

Taking the time to learn how to pronounce a name is a subtle way of demonstrating your care and respect for others, and acknowledging we live in a diverse world. It is good practice to respectfully ask an individual how their name is pronounced, if in doubt.

2.3 Visibility and context

Making references to an individual's cultural or linguistic background and/or faith is generally not necessary within a work context. Describing a staff member as a 'Chinese-Australian lecturer' when not relevant to the context could have the impact of othering them, reinforcing stereotypes and reducing an individual to one aspect of their identity and experience.

However, where it is appropriate or necessary to speak about a person's cultural background, try to be as specific as possible. Referring to an individual as 'Asian' or 'African' overlooks the unique languages and cultures of many countries across these regions and continents. Remember to ask the person how they describe their own cultural or linguistic background, and do not make assumptions about their faith, beliefs or attitudes based on where they or their family members were born.

Marketing and promotional images

While drawing unnecessary attention to individuals' cultural backgrounds is to be avoided, it is important that the diversity of RMIT's staff and student population is reflected in marketing and

promotional collateral. Images of diverse groups and individuals builds a more realistic picture of RMIT and can help prospective staff and students feel they would be welcome here.

2.4 Stereotypes – even 'positive' ones – can be upsetting

'Where are you from?' 'Your English is so good!' - while these comments may seem innocent or even complimentary, they can also feel individuals feel singled out, othered, or judged, and are best avoided unless you know the person well. In addition, using a person's physical appearance, accent, or name to assume they are 'foreign' can lead to that person feeling set apart from their peers. These factors are not reliable indicators of a person's nationality or citizenship. It is important to not assume that your colleagues, students, or peers wish to share these aspects of their identity with you, or that they have any obligation to share this with you.

Cultural stereotyping is common and can lead to inaccurate ideas that people from particular cultural backgrounds are not capable of taking on certain roles. Similarly, if a person makes jokes or uses particular terms to describe their own cultural background, this does not mean they will be comfortable with others using that language to them or about them.

3. Disability and Accessibility

Australians with disability face some of the most significant barriers to work of all groups in the workforce, with employment participation rates around 30.7 percentage points lower than other Australians (Australian Network on Disability, 2019).

Not all disabilities are visible, and not all people with a disability will be comfortable speaking openly about it. The best strategies for inclusive communication with or about people with disability include:
- focusing on the person, not the disability
- avoiding language that implies people with disabilities are victims, or are inspirations simply for living with disability, for example, 'suffers from'.
- thinking about whether referring to a person's disability is relevant (in most cases, it will not be)

Below are some examples of commonly accepted language and inclusive behaviour, but you should always defer to a person's individual preferences where they have made these known.

3.1 Person-centred Language

A person is not defined by their disability, and it is important to use language that acknowledges this. Describing someone as a 'sufferer' or 'victim' paints them as powerless. A good general rule is to avoid any language that frames disability as a limitation. Some language to avoid:
- 'Suffers from': try 'lives with' or 'has' (i.e., 'Jean has cystic fibrosis').

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- 'Disabled' toilets or facilities: 'accessible' is the best term ('ambulant' is sometimes used but can be problematic as it literally means 'able to walk around').
- 'Wheelchair-bound': wheelchairs liberate and enable mobility; they do not confine. 'Wheelchair user' is more appropriate when access needs to be highlighted.
- 'Special' or 'normal': use of these terms in relation or contrast to disability should be avoided.
- Don't describe a person as 'being' their condition – for example, 'Vanessa is paraplegic.' 'Vanessa has paraplegia' is correct. The exception is people and groups that use identity-first language to describe themselves, in which case you should do the same: 'Vanessa is Deaf.'

People With Disability Australia has produced a useful guide to language and terminology: https://pwd.org.au/resources/disability-info/language-guide/

3.2   Body Language and Behaviour

Always ensure that you speak directly to the person, and not to anybody else who may be accompanying or assisting them (e.g., interpreters).

When meeting with or speaking here are some guiding principles to consider
- somebody who uses a wheelchair, you may wish to choose a location where you can sit down too, so that you can put yourself at the same level as the person.
- somebody who has a vision impairment, if that person has a seeing eye dog with them, do not interact with the dog (i.e., Patting or talking to it), this dog is working.
- someone with a hearing impairment, try not to cover your mouth when speaking with them, it is possible they are lip reading to support their hearing ability.

To ensure easy communication consider the physical environment, is it loud? Is it busy? Are there bright lights? If you are communicating with someone who is neurodivergent, what is being said may not be easily understood.

If a person with a disability, especially someone who uses a wheelchair, or people who are deaf or those with a vision impairment, it is not appropriate to touch or grab a person with the intention of helping them. If you think someone may need assistance, ask if you can help before intervening.

4. Digital Accessibility

Inclusive communication is not just about language. It is also about the tools we use to present information and ensuring that the audience can access it. If you are creating digital content at RMIT, familiarise yourself with the Digital Accessibility Framework. This covers the University's standards for ensuring that web content can be accessed using assistive technology (such as screen readers), and that visual content can be perceived and understood by all visitors (via captions on images, subtitles, and transcripts for videos, etc.).

Simple things like ensuring text is a reasonable size and that there is a high level of contrast between text and background can make a big difference to a person with low vision.

Vision Australia has developed a free accessibility toolbar to help you create accessible Word documents. You can learn more about the toolbar on their website: https://www.visionaustralia.org/services/digital-access/resources

4.1 On language – Person-centred language vs Identity-first language

What is 'identity-first language'?

Identity-first language puts a person's disability identity before the person – for example, 'disabled person' or 'Autistic person' - instead of 'person with autism' or 'Deaf' - instead of 'person who is deaf'.

Many people with disability prefer to use identity-first language because they see their disability as a key part of their identity. They use identity-first language to show their connection to the disability community, demonstrate disability pride and emphasise that it is society that is disabling.

As with many communities, language and terms can be contested and challenged, as well as constantly changing and shifting. People with lived experience of disability, their carers and families and disability advocacy organisations are likely to use differing language in differing circumstances, with some using person-first language (eg, people with disabilities, person with autism) and some using identity first language (eg, disabled people, autistic).

It is important to respect the language that others use to describe themselves, and best practice is to:
1. Follow the lead of the individual, so if the person is using identity first language, ask them if this is their preference when being referred to.
2. Never assume their preference and use person-centred practices unless asked directly.

5. Gender, Sex and Sexuality

RMIT recognises and values the diversity of its staff, students and community and commits to ensuring people are not limited by gender stereotypes, gender roles or prejudices. Communication plays an important role in this as language can reinforce gender bias or gender stereotypes.

Inclusive language is a way of acknowledging and respecting the diversity of bodies, genders, and relationships.

Sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexuality are all distinct characteristics, though they are sometimes used incorrectly or interchangeably. Learn more our LGBTIQA+ Introduction module: Click here to find out more about LGBTIQA+ Inclusive Best Practice

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5.1 Use of pronouns

A transgender or non-binary person (somebody who does not wholly identify as either male or female) will use the pronouns that best reflect their gender identity (remember that this may not be related to their biological sex).

In some cases, a person may use pronouns that are more gender neutral or that do not reference a single gender at all ('they'/'them'/'theirs').

Be respectful of people's pronouns. If in doubt, ask them privately. Pronouns might include (but are not limited to):
- he/him/his
- she/her/hers
- they/them/theirs

Some people may use a combination of the above that affirms their gender identity.

5.2 Acronyms and preferred language

You have probably seen variations of LGBT, GLBTI, LGBTIQ used to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer people and communities. There are many arguments for and against the use of such acronyms, but it is generally agreed that most variations do not represent the full spectrum of sexuality and gender identity.

Inclusive language continues to evolve over time as people find the language that best suits their identity and experience.

For example, some older documents use terms such as 'sexual preference' and 'lifestyle choice' when referring to the LGBTIQA+ community. This language is outdated, as it implies that there is a choice in our identity. We can't choose our gender identity or sexual orientation - it's just part of who we are!

If you see the terms 'sexual preference' or 'lifestyle choice,' replace them with 'sexual orientation' or 'gender identity.
- Use '**are** LGBTIQA+', instead of 'identify as'
- Use 'LGBTIQA+ **communities**', instead of 'community', as there are many with a variety of wants, needs, and experiences, etc
- Use 'People of diverse genders and sexualities', or 'diversity in gender and sexuality' instead of 'gender diversity and sexuality communities'

Connect with the Ally network on yammer (for RMIT staff): Click here to join the Yammer RMIT Ally Network

If you would like advice about supporting and communicating with and about LGBTIQA+ staff and students, contact the network through the Equity and Diversity Unit email address: inclusion@rmit.edu.au

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6. Resources

This guide was largely adapted (with permission) from the Diversity Council of Australia's series of resources, Words at Work. These materials can be accessed by all RMIT staff members.

You can create an account on DCA's website, which will give you access to a range of useful information and research on workplace diversity and inclusion: https://www.dca.org.au/inclusive-language-0

If you are keen to learn more, please feel free to continue your reading using the resources below:
- Words At Work: Building inclusion for people with disability through the power of language – Diversity Council of Australia
- LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Language Guide - Victorian Government
- https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/inclusive-and-respectful-language.pdf
- https://staff.uq.edu.au/files/242/using-inclusive-language-guide.pdf
- https://www.dca.org.au/sites/default/files/dca_wordsatwork_overall_guide.pdf
- https://staff.uq.edu.au/files/242/using-inclusive-language-guide.pdf
- https://www.ucda.com/best-practices-for-inclusive-and-diverse-photography-in-higher-education/
- https://www.amnesty.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AIA-Inclusive-Language-and-Events-Guide-3.pdf
- https://www.adcet.edu.au/resources/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language
- https://rainbowhealthaustralia.org.au/media/pages/research-resources/inclusive-language-guide/2013898455-1650953507/lbgtiq-inclusive-language-guide.pdf
- https://www.vic.gov.au/state-disability-plan/our-language/person-first-and-identity-first-language

7. Contacts

For general advice on diversity and inclusion matters (in relation to students), contact the Equity and Inclusion team (Students Group) via email: inclusion@rmit.edu.au

For general advice on diversity and inclusion matters (in relation to staff), contact the Equity and Diversity team (People) via email: diversity.inclusion@rmit.edu.au

For specialised advice on communicating with staff and students with disability, contact the Equitable Learning Services: els@rmit.edu.au

For specialized advice on communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students, contact RMIT's Ngarara Willim Centre: ngarara@rmit.edu.au

You can also read more about RMIT's commitment to diversity and inclusion on our website: https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-values/diversity-and-inclusion

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For guidance on delivering inclusive events please visit:
https://rmiteduau.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/EquityDiversityInclusionteam/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?

8. References

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- Victorian Government (2021) LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Language Guide, Victorian Government, accessed 10 June 2022.
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Equity and Inclusion, Students Group

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For feedback or to get in touch, please email us at: inclusion@rmit.edu.au

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