

What is culture?

When we talk about culture, we usually think about countries. We talk about Australian culture, Chinese culture, Lebanese culture, and so on. This article, however, is about *academic culture*; that is, the culture of universities. It focuses on the culture of universities in English-speaking countries, especially in Australia. But before we talk about what academic culture is, what do we mean by 'culture'?

How do we know that someone is Australian or Italian? Chinese or Indonesian? Lebanese or Iranian? Often we look at how they behave. We might notice things like:

- The type of food they eat
- The clothes they wear
- What they call each other
- How they greet each other
- How they show that they are being polite.

For example, most Australians call people by their first name, and greet each other by saying things like 'How are you?' or 'How're you going?'; they say 'please' and 'thank you' to be polite. Most Chinese, however, use titles when they talk to someone older than themselves, or someone who has a higher status. They often greet people by asking 'Where are you going?' and may show politeness by remaining silent. They are not likely to use 'please' and 'thank you' with family members or friends or when buying things in shops. So from this example, we can see that a person's cultural background affects how they behave.

However, culture does not only refer to how someone behaves. People who share a culture also share many attitudes and values. Most Australians, for example, believe that people should all be treated in the same way, no matter how old they are, or what their job is. This is why they call almost everybody by their first name. In contrast, Chinese culture places importance on hierarchy. This means that Chinese people are likely to show respect to older people, or to people with higher status, and one of the ways they do this is by using titles and the whole of a person's name when they talk to such people.

What is academic culture?

Just as we can talk about Australian culture or Chinese culture, we can talk about the culture of universities. This is usually called 'academic culture.' Academic culture refers to the attitudes, values and ways of behaving that are shared by people who work or study in universities, for example, lecturers, researchers and students. In this book, we will identify what these academic attitudes and values are, and how they affect the ways that students and lecturers are expected to behave.

Why is academic culture important?

As a new university student, you probably expect to gain knowledge and to develop new skills. But this is not all that you have to learn. You also have to understand the attitudes and values of academic culture, because your lecturers will expect you to behave in ways that demonstrate these attitudes and values.

All students have to become familiar with this new culture, no matter where they come from. Academic culture is unfamiliar to many students who have been educated in Australia, just as it may be unfamiliar to students from China, India, Indonesia and other countries.

What are English speaking universities?

This book is about academic culture in English speaking universities, but what are English speaking universities? In countries as diverse as India, Germany, Japan and Oman, English is used as the language of instruction in at least some universities. However, while universities in many countries teach in English, they do not necessarily share the same academic culture. In describing academic culture in English-speaking universities, this book is referring to the common culture of universities in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the USA. This does not imply that universities in these countries are all the same, but it does suggest that they share a number of attitudes and values in common. These attitudes and values are expressed most clearly in the types of academic behaviour that are expected from scholars and students alike. This book attempts to describe some of these behaviours and to explore some of the attitudes and values that underpin them.

Brick, J.(2016). *Academic culture: A student's guide to studying at university*. South Yarra, VIC: Palgrave Macmillan.

Do all disciplines share the same culture?

Is the culture of a discipline like economics the same as the culture of a discipline such as information technology? The answer is both 'yes' and 'no'! Some attitudes, values and behaviours are shared by all disciplines—from astronomy to zoology. Others relate to specific disciplines. For example, all disciplines expect you to be independent and critical learners, and they generally agree on what 'independent' means. (You will find more about being an independent learner in chapter 4.) However, disciplines have different ideas about what being 'critical' involves. For example, in the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology and so on) and in the applied sciences—such as engineering and information technology—critical thinking usually involves problem solving. This means that you have to decide what theories and concepts are most appropriate to solve a problem, and then use them to solve it. On the other hand, in the social sciences—such as economics, business studies, psychology, sociology and so on—you are more likely to compare and contrast different theories and concepts, and to evaluate their usefulness and applicability in specific situations.

Different disciplines ask different types of questions, and they may also vary in the methods that they use to answer those questions. The methods used to investigate questions in physics are different, for example, from those used to answer questions in business studies or IT.

Another area of difference between disciplines lies in the types of text that you have to write. History students, for example, often have to write argumentative essays, while psychology students are more likely to write research reports. Students of biology and physics often have to work in groups to produce posters, while students in business studies—also working in groups—may produce reports.