

**Good Practice Principles in Practice:
Teaching Across Cultures**

A Quick Guide to Working with Student Learning Services

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Good Practice Principles in Practice

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Introduction

This guide is intended for teaching staff and for those who support the learning of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Cultural diversity in the student population is now the norm rather than the exception in Australian universities. Culture is not only defined by nationality or ethnicity. The term culture is a very broad concept that encompasses the lifestyle, traditions, knowledge, skills, beliefs, norms and values shared by a group of people. Cultures are most often recognised by shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and affective understandings. These are learned through a process of socialization. However, within different cultural groups, individuals are unique. Meaning is continuously constructed through human interaction and communication within and across cultural groups. Cultural learning is a dynamic, developmental and ongoing process for students and teachers. Cultural diversity in the student population has a significant impact on teaching and learning.

This guide draws on current literature on learning and teaching across cultures, on findings from relevant projects funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council from 2006-2012. You can find full summaries of these projects in the Good Practice Report Learning and Teaching Across Cultures available at <http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-good-practice-report-learning-and-teaching-across-cultures-2011>.

This guide is one of a suite of Quick Guides on topics relevant to learning and teaching across cultures. Other guides are available from ieaa.org.au/ltac.

The Good Practice Principles: Teaching Across Cultures

This guide is organised around six principles of good practice for teaching across cultures. Each guide interprets the principles in practice.

Principle 1: Good teaching across cultures will **focus on students as learners**

Principle 2: Good teaching across cultures will **respect and adjust for diversity**

Principle 3: Good teaching across cultures will **provide context-specific information and support**

Principle 4: Good teaching across cultures will **enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement**

Principle 5: Good teaching across cultures will be **adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence**

Principle 6: Good teaching across cultures will **prepare students for life in a globalised world**

You can find a detailed description of each Principle at ieaa.org.au/ltac.

In this guide, the focus is on how teachers might work effectively with student services staff to put these good practice principles into practice. This guide may be used to evaluate current activities and identify areas for improvement as well as examples of best practice.

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Principles into practice: student services

Principle 1: Focus on students as learners

One of the responsibilities of the university is to ensure a well-managed transition to university life and learning environments for all students. International students, indigenous students, local students from migrant and refugee backgrounds, students from rural and isolated backgrounds and students enrolled in courses taught offshore have distinctive learning needs. Many of the students' needs during transition will be managed within classrooms; some are more appropriately shared with student services staff. Working together, while focussing on students as learners, teachers and support staff can meet diverse students' distinctive needs during all stages of the student life-cycle.

What to look for

'At risk' students are identified early

*Recognise and address the intensifiers, "separation from the usual support network, including family and friends, separation from the familiar and the consequent 'fish out of water' feeling or lack of familiarity with, and understanding of academic as well as general way of life" (CG7-507, p. 19).**

Centrally located support team work closely with academic staff to identify risk indicators.

Student services staff assist teachers to understand and respond to culturally diverse students' learning needs to minimise risk.

Early intervention programs are in place to identify students at academic risk.

Everyone working with students recognises the effort required to find out about students' educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They try and learn students' names where possible and then use them.

'At risk' students are guided and referred to support for academic, language or personal issues

There are mechanisms in place for on-going monitoring of students' well-being and adjustment.

Teachers take appropriate action where necessary to refer students to support services.

Teachers and support service staff have ongoing mutually respectful working relationships

Teachers and support services staff work together in devising orientation and ongoing care strategies.

Where appropriate, support services staff are invited to classrooms and make themselves and their expertise known to students.

Teachers ensure all students are introduced to learning support staff early in the semester.

All staff work within requirements for privacy and confidentiality.

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Principle 2: Respect and adjust for diversity

Support staff and teachers are aware of the how cultural and linguistic diversity may impact on learning in an Australian university and adjust their services to accommodate these issues. Adjustment is guided by knowledge of and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity.

What to look for

Teaching staff are aware of cultural issues which may cause problems for students as learners

Teachers access information collected by the university about teaching diverse students.

Teachers make adjustments to accommodate the learning needs of students.

Teaching and support staff regularly exchange information on available support services and student issues.

Teachers are supported by academic language and learning staff in making adjustments to their teaching and assessment to accommodate student diversity.

* Quote from ALTC/OLT project. Please refer to back page of this guide for project details.

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What to look for

Teachers are aware of specialist support services provided for students

Students are informed at commencement and regularly reminded as the program progresses by their teachers about support services available to them.
Mentoring and other peer support programs are available and actively supported by staff.

Teachers and support services staff work as a team to support student learning

Referral systems are in place and teachers use them.
Students are referred to service providers for personal and academic issues beyond the expertise of their teachers.
Teaching staff demonstrate approval of learning support services to lessen the risk of stigma attached to seeking help. For example, learning support staff and teachers collaborate on the design of workshops for students or learning support services staff provide a segment in a lecture on how to approach a particular assessment task.

Religious requirements are respected

The impact on students of major festivals such as Ramadan, Divali and Chinese New Year is recognised and appropriate adjustments made to accommodate religious duties. For example, exams are scheduled sensitively, avoiding holy days where possible and/or alternative arrangements are provided.

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Principle 3: Provide context-specific information and support

For information to be useful, it needs to be context-specific and to be drafted in ways which are sensitive to culture and language issues, especially but not exclusively, at the start of university study. Unresolved settlement and academic adjustment issues can have a serious negative impact on student learning and some students will approach teachers for assistance before going to learning support staff.

What to look for

Teaching and support staff are aware of the special needs of different groups of students

Information relevant to the circumstances of different groups, such as post-graduates, refugees, indigenous students, international students and disabled students, is routinely provided and regularly updated as the student profile changes.

Information provided to students is sensitive to differences in their previous social, cultural and educational experiences

Students know when and how they can ask questions.
Academic writing skills include tips on decoding questions. What is the assessor looking for?
Information avoids giving the impression that there is only one way to organise systems or institutions.
Differences between Australian procedures and requirements and those in other countries are explained where appropriate. Teaching and support staff make the implicit explicit.

Support and teaching staff encourage students to seek out information as and when they need it

A variety of people including teachers, learning support staff and well-trained peer mentors are involved in organising and delivering orientation activities.
Critical orientation information is provided in a variety of ways: face-to-face, in print form, online, and interactively.
Support extends beyond orientation and key messages are reinforced. Information overload in the first few weeks is avoided. This can be fairly simply done if information relevant at different times of the semester is available on a web-site and students are sent regular emails to remind them it's there, or the site is linked to online teaching materials for easy, just-in-time access.

Expectations concerning attendance are explicit and consistently communicated

There are opportunities for students to discuss significant differences between their expectations and those of university staff. Informal get-togethers are a good way for students to interact with support staff and teachers to ask questions.
Teaching and support staff work together to stress the importance of attendance for scheduled teaching and engagement in learning activities (in class and online). Monitoring of online activity is increasingly being used as a reliable and practical form of tracking student engagement.

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Principle 4: Good teaching across cultures will enable meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement

Interaction between culturally and linguistically diverse students will not happen automatically. Teachers and learning support staff can work together and individually to enable and facilitate meaningful intercultural dialogue and engagement. Collaborative effort will be needed during orientation, in classrooms and on campus. Some students will approach teachers for assistance before going to learning support staff.

What to look for

Structured social activities encourage intercultural friendships and interaction

Mentoring and buddy programs include training in intercultural awareness and communication. Interaction between international students, domestic students and families is encouraged and supported.

Organised interactive activities are inclusive

** Students particularly value peer support networks* (CG6-38, p. 9).**

Domestic and international students are involved in mentoring schemes. Mentors are trained and their role is supported by teachers and support staff. Training emphasises the importance of self reflection and self awareness.

Students develop their own formal and informal support networks

Opportunities are provided for international students to learn about local cultures through, for example, informal interactions with Australian 'host' families, visits to rural areas/cities, interaction with local community and sporting groups and participation in volunteering. Community groups are encouraged to interact with international students. Diversity within the Australian student body is recognised and celebrated. Australian students are encouraged to assist international students to settle into the university and into the life of the community.

There are links between learning in class and learning in co-curricular activities

Support services are available to assist international students to develop strategies to participate effectively in informal situations in and out of class as well as formal oral presentations. Students are rewarded for non-academic or co-curricular intercultural interactions. Some universities offer certificates or otherwise recognise the benefits of intercultural activities.

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Principle 5: Be adaptable, flexible and responsive to evidence

Given the broad range of students' needs, increasing demands on teaching and service staff and decreasing budgets there is always a need to be flexible in response to evidence. Quality assurance and monitoring of the effectiveness of support services is key in responding to student needs and providing the best possible outcome for students.

What to look for

Knowledge on dealing with cultural and linguistic issues is current

Support staff and teachers are aware of current trends in recruitment and in tracking the experiences of diverse students. Staff are given time for professional development to ensure best practice. Web based student support and professional development materials reflect current best practice. Support staff and teaching staff undertake systematic review of the relevant literature on learning support. Specialists from other universities and countries visit regularly and contribute to the professional development of all staff.

What to look for

Student feedback and performance prompts appropriate adjustments and initiatives

Students' experiences of learning support are collected.

Information is regularly exchanged between teaching and support staff on issues related to student settlement and performance. Responsibility for student learning support is a shared endeavour. Consultation meetings with students and surveys of their experiences occur regularly. Responses are kept anonymous where possible to encourage openness. Students are kept informed about changes made on the feedback from previous surveys and meetings.

Principle 6: Preparing students for life in a globalised world

Teachers can work with learning support providers to develop students' intercultural skills, knowledge and values for life in a globalised and interconnected world. Before graduation, the focus is on making the most of opportunities in the formal and the informal curriculum.

What to look for

Multiple perspectives on global issues are welcomed from students, teachers and learning support staff

Learning support and teaching staff come from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

*When teachers and learning support people use examples, illustrations and case studies they reflect multiple, settings, perspectives and contexts (CG8-766, p. 45).**

Intercultural dialogue and awareness is valued by all support service staff and teachers

Credence and respect is given to variations in English language use.

Australian students are encouraged by teachers and support services staff to talk with international students re life and work in their countries.

International experience and engagement with cultural diversity at home is recognised and rewarded through global leadership/experience awards.

Students have access to career information and services that are internationally relevant

Specific career planning sessions are provided for students who wish to work overseas, including international students and Australian students seeking internships or employment overseas.

Skype sessions allow overseas employers to contribute and give access to careers expositions for graduates.

Graduates returning to their home countries are provided with advice on transitioning to life and work after study in Australia. Where relevant, international students are given specific advice on seeking employment in Australia.

Alumni are used actively and creatively

Chapters are active offshore and are closely connected to the university.

Related OLT Projects

CG7-378, *Enhancing frameworks for assuring the quality of teaching and learning in offshore education programs*, <http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-enhancing-frameworks-quality-teaching-offshore-uwa-2010>.

CG6-37, *Embedding the development of intercultural competence in business education*, <http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-embedding-development-business-usyd-2009>.

CG8-766, *Investigating the efficacy of culturally specific academic literacy and academic honesty resources for Chinese students*, <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-investigating-efficacy-vu-2008>.

CG7-453, *Addressing the ongoing English language growth of international students*, <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-addressing-ongoing-english-monash-2007>.

CG6-38, *Diversity: a longitudinal study of how student diversity relates to resilience and successful progression in a new generation university*, <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-diversity-longitudinal-study-how-ecu-2006>.

Key References

AVCC 2005, *Provision of education to international students: code of practice and guidelines for Australian universities*, <http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/resources/337/324>.

Barker, M, Hibbins, R & Farrelly, B 2011, 'Walking the talk: fostering a sense of global citizenry amongst staff in higher education', in V Clifford & C Montgomery (eds), *Moving towards internationalisation of the curriculum for global citizenship in higher education*, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, England, pp. 47-68.

Viete, R & Peeler, E 2007, 'Respectful encounters: valuing each other in teacher professional learning contexts', in A Berry, A Clemans & A Kostogriz (eds), *Dimensions of professional learning: professionalism, practice and identity*, Sense, Rotterdam, pp. 178-190.

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