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# Guide to Inclusive Language

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RMIT Diversity and Inclusion

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# Introduction

## Why do we need an inclusive language guide?

RMIT is committed to ensuring an equitable and inclusive experience for staff and students.

Ready For Life and Work: RMIT's Strategic Plan to 2020 places our people at the heart of what we do. This is reflected through our organisational value of 'Inclusion'.

For RMIT, this means creating an environment and culture where our staff and students can feel recognised and valued for their distinct talents and perspectives.

Language is critical to inclusion, and how we speak to and about one another influences how we treat one another. Research demonstrates that inclusive cultures are high-performing cultures – we are more driven to contribute and succeed when we feel we are appreciated for our unique contributions, and that we belong within the organisation and our immediate working teams (Catalyst, Inclusive Leadership: The View From Six Countries, 2014).

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

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This guide has been adapted from the excellent resources produced by the Diversity Council of Australia, which all RMIT staff are also able to access. You can create an account on their website to view their complete suite of Words at Work inclusive communications resources:

You can create an account on their website to view their complete suite of Words at Work inclusive communications resources

<https://www.dca.org.au/inclusive-language>

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>

## How to use this guide

This guide covers general principles of inclusive communication, and specific examples and guidelines for communicating with some key groups. It refers to written and spoken communication, and also gives examples of body language and behavioural communication that can sometimes be overlooked.

The guide includes examples and advice related to:

- gender, sex and sexuality
- cultural and linguistic diversity
- disability and accessibility
- delivering inclusive events
- You may wish to refer to this guide:
  - when designing external-facing communications and marketing materials
  - when preparing a presentation or event for an internal or external audience
  - as an opportunity for personal reflection and professional development
  - when inducting a new staff member

The guide should not override the preferences of individual staff members or students. Everybody has different ways in which they would prefer to be spoken to, or about. If you are unsure of a person's preferred terms, pronouns or identifiers, just ask them.'

Language evolves over time and while this guide reflects recommended practice at the time of writing, it may include content that is still in contention, or is under debate. We welcome feedback from the RMIT community about this guide, and will continue to revise it as appropriate.

## Five steps to inclusive language\*

### Context matters

Language that may be fine outside of work can be non-inclusive at work. Sometimes people can use terms about themselves or their friends that are not appropriate for others to use about someone in a work context.

### Keep an open mind

Be open to changing what you have always thought is 'normal', respectful and appropriate to say. You don't have to be perfect – just be willing to learn.

### If in doubt, ask

If you're not sure what terminology someone prefers, just ask them! Ask the person or contact organisations that make up and represent given diversity groups.

You can also contact RMIT's Student Diversity and Inclusion team at [Inclusion@rmit.edu.au](mailto:Inclusion@rmit.edu.au) for advice or resources.

### Focus on the person

Focus on the person first, rather than the demographic group they belong to. Only refer to an individual's age, cultural background, gender etc. if it is relevant.

Even 'positive' stereotypes (e.g. 'Asian people are so good at math!') are problematic, as they prioritise a cultural stereotype over the individual.

### Keep calm and respond

Sometimes our unconscious biases mean we can say things that exclude others – even when we do not intend to.

Responding with 'it was just a joke' or 'don't take it so seriously' is not helpful. If you have accidentally caused offence, make an effort to understand how and why.

\* Adapted from the Diversity Council of Australia's five step guide to inclusive language.

## How to respond to non-inclusive language

### Direct is best

The clearest way to set expectations about inclusive language in your place of work is to address any non-inclusive language directly, and at the time it occurs.

For example, you may choose to:

- call out the language or behaviour openly: 'That's pretty demeaning towards women... do you really feel that way?'
- appeal to the person's better nature: 'It doesn't sound like you to say something like that'
- take the person aside at a later moment and explain why the language or behaviour was upsetting to you. Personal stories and anecdotes can be the most powerful way of influencing others

### The indirect approach

If you do not feel comfortable calling out the behaviour or language directly, an indirect approach can still signal your discomfort.

For example:

- 'wow...'
- 'really?'
- 'okay, moving on now...'

It is important to remember in the workplace that what may be funny to one person can be offensive or upsetting to another. Comments intended as a joke can be considered to be a form of harassment or discriminatory behaviour, therefore any jokes that demean or are disparaging to particular groups of people or characteristics are best avoided.

# Gender, Sex and Sexuality

RMIT acknowledges that everyone deserves to be treated with respect, and we are committed to ensuring that systems and processes treat all people equally.

## Gendered Language

Our Action Plan for Gender Equality seeks to address barriers to women's career progression and advancement at RMIT, and to support a workplace free of gender-based discrimination.

Communication plays an important role in this. Telling a colleague to 'man up' or referring to a female manager as 'hysterical' both use out-dated gender stereotypes, and are likely to cause offence.

Pay attention to words or expressions that are commonly used to or about individuals of particular genders, but not others. These can reveal conscious or unconscious biases (i.e. words like 'shrill' and 'nagging' are commonly used in relation to women, but rarely men).

## Sexuality and gender diversity

The argument that a person's sexual orientation is not a workplace matter is common, but flawed. A person who is heterosexual brings their orientation to work every day, and is free to discuss this openly without fear of discrimination. Even something as simple of describing what we did on our weekend can reveal personal information ('My husband/wife and I went out for dinner', 'I went camping with my girlfriend/ boyfriend').

Sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexuality are all distinct characteristics, though they are sometimes used incorrectly or interchangeably. Sex relates to a person's physical form, which can be female, male, or intersex.

Gender identity is an innate personal and social identity, which underpins how we relate to others, and links in to a range of assumptions about behaviour and norms.

Gender expression is how an individual demonstrates and communicates their gender identity (clothes, make up, gestures, voice).

Sexuality refers to who people are intimately attracted to. It can range from opposite-sex attracted

(heterosexual or straight), same-sex attracted (gay, lesbian), attracted to all genders (bisexual, pansexual), or attracted to none (asexual, aromantic).

Each of these are a spectrum, and we all fit somewhere along the spectrum. It is important to note that each of these characteristics are separate and unlinked – a person's biological sex does not determine their gender identity.

Here are some other terms you may have heard in discussions of gender:

Cis or cisgender describes a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Trans (or transgender) is a term used to describe a person whose gender identify does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth.

## Use of pronouns

A trans person, or a person who is of non-binary gender (i.e. somebody who does not wholly identify as either male or female) may 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 choose to use pronouns that do not reference gender at all ('they'/'them'/'their').

Be respectful of people's pronouns. If in doubt, ask them privately. Pronouns might include:

- he/him/his
- she/her/hers
- they/them/theirs

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

## Acronyms and preferred language

You have probably seen variations of LGBT, GLBTI, LGBTIQ used to describe lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex 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 sex, sexuality and gender identity.

In response to guidance from our Working Party and the broader community, RMIT refers to people or individuals 'of diverse genders, sexes and sexualities (DGSS)'. We believe this language is representative of our whole community, and we encourage you to use this description if speaking to or about staff and students who identify as sexuality and gender diverse.

Inclusive language continues to evolve over time as people find the language that best suits their identity. It's important to try to stay up to date.

For example, some old documents use terms such as 'sexual preference' and 'lifestyle choice' when referring to the DGSS 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." If you have further questions, you can always get in touch with the Diversity and Inclusion team at [inclusion@rmit.edu.au](mailto:inclusion@rmit.edu.au)

## Avoiding Stereotypes

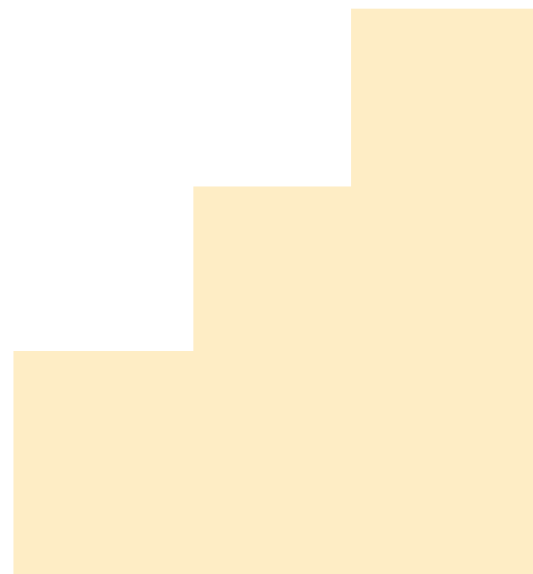
It is important to avoid stereotypes based on sex, sexuality or gender. A person's sex, sexuality and gender identity are important parts of who they are, but do not define who they are. Any attempt to reduce a person to a single characteristic of their identity is likely to cause offence.

## Gender Options

Many university documents, systems or sign-ups ask for gender or titles. It's important to keep these options inclusive of individuals who identify as gender diverse.

Suggested questions and options are: What is your gender identity?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary and gender diverse
- My gender identity is not listed What is your title?
- Mr
- Ms
- Mx



## Ask your Allies

RMIT has an Ally Network to support staff and students of diverse genders, sexes and sexualities. Allies are staff members who have undertaken training in DGSS issues, and can provide advice and support to staff and students.

Allies can be identified by their 'RMIT Ally Network' email signature. If you would like to be connected with an ally who can support or advise you with regard to a specific matter, you can reach out confidentially to an ally from the People team. Connect with the Ally network on Yammer: [https://www.yammer.com/rmit.edu.au/#/threads/inGroup?type=in\\_group&feedId=5664153600](https://www.yammer.com/rmit.edu.au/#/threads/inGroup?type=in_group&feedId=5664153600)

If you would like advice about supporting and communicating with and about DGSS staff and students, contact the network through the Equity and Diversity Unit email address: [inclusion@rmit.edu.au](mailto:inclusion@rmit.edu.au)

RMIT is a top-tier member of Pride in Diversity, a national not-for-profit employer support program for DGSS workplace inclusion. You can access their materials supporting a more inclusive workplace culture and environment through their website: <http://www.prideinclusionprograms.com.au/>

Learn more about supporting inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in our DGSS Introduction module! - <https://rmit.bridgeapp.com/learner/courses/3925/slide/3160>

# Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

In the most recent RMIT staff survey conducted in 2019, 49% of staff indicated that they were born outside of Australia. Of RMIT's 93,000+ students, in 2018, 21 per cent are international students in Australia and 18 per cent are international students outside Australia, including at RMIT Vietnam.

A community that is well equipped to communicate and collaborate effectively with individuals with diverse circumstances and backgrounds is integral to our success as an inclusive work and study environment.

## Visibility: how much is too much?

Making references to an individual's cultural background and/or faith is generally not necessary within a work context. Describing a staff member as a 'Chinese-Australian lecturer' indicates that they are in some way unusual or different from their colleagues.

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. Remember to ask the person how they describe their own cultural background, and do not make assumptions about a person (for example, 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, you should endeavour to ensure that the diversity of RMIT's staff and student population is represented in marketing and promotional collateral. Images of diverse groups and individuals can help prospective staff and students feel they would be welcome at RMIT.

## 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 are best avoided unless you know the person. 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.

Cultural stereotyping is common, and agreed it 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 or about them.



# Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

RMIT acknowledges that we live, work and participate in the production of knowledge on the unceded lands of Australia's Indigenous 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 Gundjitrara.

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>

RMIT's Reconciliation Action Plan identifies the priorities for appointment, retention, development and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students. Learn about the current Reconciliation Action Plan, *Dhumbah Goorowa*: <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-values/respect-for-australian-indigenous-cultures/reconciliation>

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

## Appropriate language and terminology

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

If you are speaking to or of 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 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.

## 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*.

## Follow RMIT Protocols

Staff organising high profile public events should organise a formal Welcome to Country. Contact the Boon Wurrung Foundation if you are on the City campus or email your completed Welcome to Country form (searchable on the RMIT Staff website) to the Wurundjeri Council for events at Bundoora or Brunswick.

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.

Scroll to the bottom of the RMIT homepage to read our Acknowledgement of Country. Ideally an Acknowledgement should be given any time people gather to conduct RMIT business. The Ngarara Willim Centre website has further information about delivering or organising a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgment of Country.

## **Celebration and Representation**

RMIT has approved Indigenous templates for Word and Powerpoint documents, which can be accessed via the system templates (click 'new document' in either program, and select from the list of templates).

Permission must always be sought through the appropriate bodies for the use or reproduction of representations of individuals, artworks and/or designs.

## **Professional Development Opportunities**

RMIT offers regular professional development sessions for staff to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, culture and heritage. Keep an eye on the [Learning and Development website](#) for upcoming sessions.



# 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](#)).

RMIT is a member of the Australian Network on Disability, and our Accessibility Action Plan sets out our mission to make the University wholly accessible to, and inclusive of, staff, students and visitors with disability. One way you can help support these objectives is to use and promote inclusive language and behaviours when communicating to or about staff, students and contacts with lived experience of disability.

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
- 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 behavior, but you should always defer to a person's individual preferences where they have made these known.

## 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').
- '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.

Pay attention to words and expressions that can make their way into everyday speech ('he is crazy', 'that was mental', 'she went completely psycho', etc). These expressions, while commonly used and rarely intended to cause harm, may be upsetting for a person with lived experience of mental illness.

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

## 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 to 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.

## 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 content for the RMIT website, 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: <http://www.visionaustralia.org/services/digital-access/document-accessibility-toolbar>

## Examples of inclusive communication

- Person/people with disability/disabilities
- People living with disability
- People/person without disability / non-disabled person
- Wheelchair user
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Person with low vision
- Person who is blind
- Person who is deaf
- Auslan user
- Hard of hearing
- People with lived experience of disability
- Intellectual disability
- Learning disability
- Person with mental illness
- Person with lived experience of mental illness
- Accessible toilet
- Adapted toilet
- Accessible parking square
- Has (insert condition)
- Experiences (insert condition)

## Wording we don't recommend

- Disabled person/people
- Differently abled
- Physically challenged
- Someone who can't hear/speak/walk
- Able-bodied
- Normal (in reference to a non-disabled person)
- Wheelchair-bound
- Bound/confined to a wheelchair
- The blind
- A blind person
- Person without sight
- Vision Impaired
- The deaf
- A deaf person
- Mute
- Slow learner
- Mental health problems
- Mental
- Mentally-ill
- Disabled toilet
- Disabled parking
- Suffers from (insert condition)



# Delivering Inclusive Events

If you are holding an event for internal or external guests, here are some questions you may wish to consider during your planning and on the day:

## Facilities and catering

- Is the venue physically accessible for guests and speakers (lift access, ramps at entries and up to the stage, placement of tables and props to enable wheelchair access, etc.)?
- Are there all gender and mobility-accessible toilet facilities?
- If the event is catered, have you confirmed with your caterer that they can provide inclusive food options (halal, kosher, gluten-free, etc.) if required?

## Presenters/facilitators

- Have you considered the importance of diversity when selecting and inviting your speakers?
- Have you confirmed with speakers their preferred name, title and pronouns for your introductions?

## Marketing and Promotion

- Are your promotional images as representative as possible?
- Is the language and tone used in your invitation inclusive of your whole target audience?
- Does your RSVP/registration form include a space for guests to indicate any individual accessibility requirements (dietary requirements, mobility assistance, etc.)?

## On the day

- Have you considered other accessibility requirements or options (i.e. Auslan interpreters, large print copies of presentations, etc.)?
- Have you briefed your host/MC to use an inclusive form of address for the audience, such as, 'Welcome everyone to this event today', rather than 'ladies and gentlemen'?
- The Australian Network on Disability has produced a more detailed checklist for running accessible events. It is viewable on their website: [www.and.org.au/pages/event-checklist.html](http://www.and.org.au/pages/event-checklist.html)



# Resources

This guide was largely adapted (with permission) from the Diversity Council of Australia's series of resources, Words at Work.

These materials are able to 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>

Another useful resource is the Australian Network on Disability's inclusive language guidelines: <https://www.and.org.au/pages/inclusive-language.html>

# Contacts

For general advice on diversity and inclusion matters, or for assistance communicating to or about DGSS staff and students, contact the Equity and Diversity Unit (Students Group) on 9925 3181 or via email: [inclusion@rmit.edu.au](mailto:inclusion@rmit.edu.au).

For specialised advice on communicating with staff and students with disability, contact the Equitable Learning Services via RMIT Connect: <https://rmit.service-now.com/connect/>

For specialized advice on communicating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students, contact RMIT's Ngararara Willim Centre: [ngarara@rmit.edu.au](mailto:ngarara@rmit.edu.au).

Our Diversity and Inclusion Framework and Action Plans are available for download: <https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/our-values/diversity-and-inclusion>.

For print copies of the Action Plans, contact the Equity and Diversity Unit.

