

Guidelines for

# Use of Inclusive Language in the HKUST Community

Using language that helps everyone  
feel valued and respected



These guidelines seek to raise awareness and assist faculty, staff, and students in making inclusive language part of everyday life and communication at HKUST.

“  
...we will foster appreciation  
of diversity to bring the  
HKUST community together.  
This will be assisted by  
enhanced communication and  
promotion of inclusiveness.”

Strategic Plan 2021-2028



# What is Inclusive Language and Why is it Important?

Language is powerful and the words you speak and write can exclude or include others.



Language can exclude others when it is offensive, intimidating, or makes another person feel small. This kind of language often reinforces negative stereotypes and results in inequality. Language can also exclude when it is not easily understood.

**Using inclusive language can help everyone, regardless of differences, feel valued and respected.**

## Why is Inclusive Language Important at HKUST?

Using inclusive language helps foster a sense of belonging and promotes diversity and equal opportunity in the University.

Inclusive language enhances communication by ensuring that everyone can understand and engage with content, of a course or in a discussion. It helps prevent misunderstandings and encourages the sharing of diverse perspectives. It assists in building positive relationships.

As language is constantly evolving, the HKUST community needs to stay up to date and adapt our use of language.

HKUST graduates will need to navigate diverse societies. By incorporating inclusive language use into daily campus life, students can develop the skills necessary to communicate effectively and respectfully in professional and social settings beyond the University.

Being inclusive is a HKUST core value. Faculty, staff, and students, need to continually strive to uphold and develop this value.

# PRINCIPLES OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Eight key ways to make your language inclusive:

# 1

## Use Person-centered Language

Person-centered language, also known as people-first language, involves emphasizing the worth of individuals as people rather than defining them for example, by a condition or disability they might have, their race, class, nationality, or gender.

By using language that centers on the person, you can foster empathy, reduce stigma, and create a more inclusive and accepting society.

Examples:



However, some people champion “identity-first” language use as a way to show group solidarity or stand up for their cause (e.g. “an autistic child” instead of “a child with autism”). Therefore, it’s important, to ask people how they would like you to refer to them.

# 2

## Consider the Situation

Before you speak or write in any circumstances, consider whether it is relevant to refer to characteristics such as race, nationality, gender, sexuality, class, religion, or disability. Avoid mentioning these attributes if they are not directly relevant and don’t contribute to deeper understanding or a meaningful conversation.

Examples:





### 3 Accept and Appreciate Different Varieties of a Language

A language can take different forms. Where a person comes from might not only determine their accent but also the words and expressions that they use.

Accepting and appreciating language varieties means understanding that use of a particular form of a language is not an indication of intelligence or competence. Language variations on campus and in the wider community should be recognized and celebrated as a valuable aspect of cultural diversity.

Such appreciation also means communicating in a way that is clear and understandable to everyone. This includes speaking at a moderate pace, using plain language, and being ready to clarify or repeat when necessary.

Being open to people who use different forms of a language ensures no variety is stigmatized or used as a basis for discrimination. This can happen when a group or individual's form of language is talked about in a disparaging way.

Examples:

- “Singlish” (Singaporean English) is really funny.
- They have a posh accent.
- He speaks with such a heavy Indian accent.

It is also worth noting that many people proudly use a language variety, within their own group and more widely, as a way to assert that their form of language is as important as the “standard” or elite variety.

# 4

## Use Language that is Easy to Understand

In addition to accepting and appreciating language varieties, you need to ensure you don't exclude people simply because they find it difficult to understand your style of language.

Use plain language and avoid colloquial expressions and jargon. For example, instead of saying someone is "in the loop", say that they are aware. Rather than stating that something is a "piece of cake", it might be better to say it is straightforward or easy.

Jargon refers to special words or expressions used by a profession or group that can be difficult for others to understand. While some technical terms may be necessary, try to use everyday language as much as possible.

Examples:

- Legal language is a specific type of jargon that may not be easily understood by all. It is also considered outdated in most communication situations. Words like "aforementioned", "hereafter", and "wherein" are part of legal jargon.
- The business world also likes to use jargon or buzzwords. Consider alternatives to phrases like "touch base" and "creating synergy".

It's also best to stay away from metaphors and other language that might only be understood by those from a particular cultural background.

Example:

- "To hit it out of the park" means to be highly successful and is a reference to baseball. The phrase would be easily understood by most North Americans but would not necessarily be understood by people from other parts of the world.

# 5

## Avoid "Othering"

"Othering" is an "us-versus-them" way of thinking. Othering involves viewing people as fundamentally different, inferior, or even threatening. It means excluding or dehumanizing individuals or groups, and this can lead to discrimination and inequality.

People might be treated as "others" based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or any other aspect of their identity.

By avoiding othering, you show that you recognize and respect a person or group's worth and dignity, regardless of their differences.

Examples involving language:

- Highlighting someone's sexuality in a demeaning way.
- Expressing fear of people belonging to certain socio-ethnic or religious groups and their actions (e.g. implying that they are likely to engage in criminal activities).
- Classifying nations as "good" or "evil".
- Using expressions such as "We do things this way here" or "They have to learn to fit in".

# 6

## Refrain from Stereotyping

Stereotyping occurs when people assign certain characteristics, traits, or ways of behaving to all members of a particular social, cultural, or demographic group.

The process involves making generalizations or assumptions about people without considering their individual differences or unique qualities.

Stereotypes often rely on oversimplified and exaggerated beliefs that are not necessarily accurate or representative of the entire group. They can be positive, negative, or neutral, but they all oversimplify human experiences and keep biases and prejudices alive.

Examples:

- Boys don't cry.
- Black people are naturally athletic.
- You're Asian. You must be good at mathematics.

If you avoid stereotyping, you recognize that individuals within a group have diverse characteristics, beliefs, and experiences.

# 7

## Steer Clear of Unbalanced Language

Unbalanced language refers to the use of language that perpetuates inequality and power disparities or results in the unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on characteristics, such as their gender, race or social class.

Also known as asymmetrical language, this can involve using language that privileges one group over another, reinforces stereotypes, or diminishes the experiences and contributions of individuals or groups outside the mainstream.

Using "he" as the go-to pronoun or referring to a woman as a "housewife" are illustrations of unbalanced language.

Examples:



# 8

## Don't Make Assumptions

Be aware of using language that assumes someone's sexual orientation, religion, or nationality.

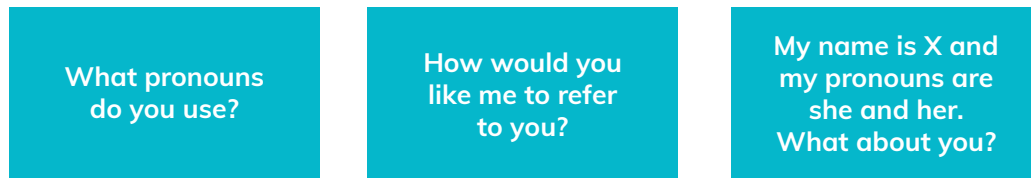
Examples:



If you are uncertain or unclear about someone's experiences or perspectives, ask and allow the person to share their own insights and stories.

When referring to a person's identity, use the terms and labels that individuals themselves prefer. Respect the way they would like to be identified and avoid imposing labels or assumptions on them.

It is also important not to make assumptions about gender. Ask about and correctly use a person's pronouns to show respect for their gender identity. This may not be important when talking to a stranger or brief acquaintance. However, if the person is a classmate, student, or coworker, it's best to find out. You can ask in the following ways:





# PUTTING THESE GUIDELINES INTO ACTION

Firstly, take care to always be inclusive in your use of language, whether talking informally with one other person, taking part in a meeting, or writing to a large group.

You also have a responsibility to check that other members of the HKUST community don't find what you are saying to be discriminatory or offensive. HKUST's "Procedures for Handling Discrimination/ Harassment Complaints" states: "The University takes all reports and complaints of discrimination/ harassment seriously." This includes use of discriminatory or offensive language.

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Ways to implement these guidelines and be more inclusive generally include:

- ✓ Using inclusive language in all your communication and interactions, setting a positive example for others and helping to create a campus culture where such language is valued and expected.
- ✓ Adopting a positive approach if you are aware of non-inclusive language use. Help the person understand why the language they are using is inappropriate. Give them alternatives they could use in future.
- ✓ Ensuring all content used in lectures or presentations, such as case studies and examples, accurately reflects the diversity of the University community and wider society. Remove stereotypes and non-inclusive language.
- ✓ Making sure all content can be accessed by a diverse audience. This means paying attention to the language used, but also the way materials are delivered.
- ✓ Using "[sic]" when referencing materials that include non-inclusive language. This shows that this language was used by the original author, and you recognize that it is no longer generally considered acceptable.
- ✓ Educating yourself about cultural differences to ensure that your materials and the delivery of your content are not offensive in intercultural communication situations.

# OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

It is likely that implementation of these guidelines will take some time, with challenges perhaps encountered along the way. These hurdles could include:

**Resistance or lack of awareness:** you may encounter people who are resistant to change or who are not fully aware of the importance and impact of inclusive language use. Some may perceive these guidelines as unnecessary or overly restrictive.

**Balancing academic freedom and inclusive language use:** the University values academic freedom, which includes engaging in open and critical discussions. Requiring use of inclusive language may sometimes be perceived as limiting academic freedom or stifling certain viewpoints.

**HKUST's multilingual context:** these guidelines apply to the use of any language in the University, not only English. Recognizing and accommodating diverse language practices and subtle cultural differences can be challenging.

As such, consistent application of these guidelines will require ongoing training and reinforcement. Open dialogue and addressing the concerns of and feedback from the University community will be important. These guidelines will be regularly reviewed by the University.

### For more information



For general enquiries: **deoc@ust.hk**

For discrimination/harassment complaints: **eoad@ust.hk**



**<https://deo.hkust.edu.hk>**

### Emotional support

Support for staff and faculty is available through the Employee Assistance Program. Counseling services for students are available via the HKUST Counseling and Wellness Center.

These guidelines were written by members of the Community for Enhancing Intercultural Learning Experiences, in consultation with faculty in the School of Humanities and Social Science and members of the Diversity and Equal Opportunities Committee.