Inclusive Language Guidance

Introduction

The University of Brighton is dedicated to cultivating an inclusive teaching and learning environment wherein all staff and students feel empowered to achieve their potential. It actively aims to promote and maintain an inclusive and diverse academic community in which students and staff are free from bullying, harassment, and victimisation. The purpose of this guidance document is to empower staff to use inclusive language confidently and effectively, to ensure that both students and staff alike feel safe, valued, and respected.

Language and meaning are powerfully conditioned by the dominant norms of the culture in which they exist. Prevailing attitudes, misconceptions and stereotypes are embedded within modes of communication, and these factors are sometimes reflected – whether consciously or not - in the language that we use when communicating with and referring to others. This means that communication – both oral and written – may be offensive even when this is not our intention.

Every individual uses and experiences language differently and addressing the impact that offensive language can have on a person, and consequently shaping our language to avoid this, is fundamental to ensuring that all individuals at the university feel safe, respected, and included. This guidance is not prescriptive, as that which constitutes inclusive language will largely vary depending on context.

It is important to take note, however, that in circumstances wherein a member of staff is communicating with a student, there is most likely a power dynamic at play, and it is the member of staff's responsibility to be aware of this and employ language that is appropriate and reflects professional boundaries. The intention of this guidance is not to infringe on academic debate in any way, and indeed it *does not need to*, as inclusive language and academic debate can coexist.

This Inclusive Language Guidance is fundamentally underpinned by the Equality Act (2010), which outlines characteristics that are protected by law - including [age, disability, gender reassignment, race,](#) [religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation](#) (amongst others) – and exists to ensure that people are not treated less favourably because they possess any of these 'protected characteristics.' This guide aims to shine a light on language and forms of communication that are outmoded, providing the reader with practical suggestions for alternative phrases that will help to foster an inclusive and diverse academic environment.

Please take note that this is by no means an exhaustive or comprehensive list of how to employ inclusive language. Culture is an ever-evolving dynamic and as it changes, notions of inclusivity – and indeed, that which constitutes inclusive language – change too. If you do make a genuine mistake with the language that you use, ensure that you apologise, and then move the conversation on.

Audience

This guidance document acts as an aid for all staff to ensure that they are using inclusive language in any given context. These contexts include, but are not limited to:

- **Oral communication**: Talks and speeches; seminars and lectures; communicating with individuals on a 1-1 basis; referring to someone.

- **Written communication:** Emails; policies; guidance documents; website content; social media platforms; lecture slides; course materials.

General Principles

Before providing specific examples of inclusive language, it is important to highlight some general tips that are applicable to any communicative context:

- **Use person centred language:**
  Avoid using descriptors that foreground a person's characteristic or reduce a person to said characteristic when referring to them. So, for example, if you are talking about people from France, it would be much more appropriate to say, 'French people,' rather than simply 'The French.'

- **Do not engage with humour that belittles people and their characteristics:**
  Discrimination and harassment can take many forms, and, in some cases, people will veil their offensive and derogatory comments with humour or 'banter.' Do not make jokes – or participate in 'banter' – wherein the subject of the joke is a person's characteristic. Jokes and humour can trivialise and perpetuate oppressive systems in society and, whatever your intention, can still cause offence.

- **Do not use slurs:**
  'Slur' refers to a word that is pejorative in nature and used to degrade and express hostility towards a person with a protected characteristic. It is almost always inappropriate to use slurs of any kind when referring to, or communicating with, a person who possesses a protected characteristic.

- **Avoid language that implies 'normalcy' based on someone's characteristics:**
  Take care to avoid using language that uses one group of people as a reference point through which to compare another group of people, as this implies a position of neutrality or normalcy. Avoid words such as 'normal,' as this implies that people that are different are 'abnormal' or 'deviant'. For example, terms like 'non-white' imply that whiteness is the norm, and that people of colour are deviations from the norm.

- **Avoid using unnecessary descriptions:**
  Ensure that the descriptors that you are using when referring to someone are relevant to the context of the conversation at hand. If the person's protected characteristic has no relevance to the context, then it is irrelevant and should not be pointed out.

- **Avoid using universalising statements:**
  It is best to avoid making generalisations about a group of people based on a characteristic that they possess. People are not homogenous - generalisations are reductive and may contribute to negative stereotypes.

- **Use 'content warnings' where appropriate:**
  It is important to acknowledge and address the potential negative impact of certain content and communication on different individuals. If your content has the potential to disturb or shock, it is appropriate to employ a content warning in the introduction. For example:

  If your content includes some discussion of sexual assault, it is a good idea to write 'Content warning: The following material engages with sexual assault' in bold font amongst your introductory remarks. This can also be employed verbally - in the context of a lecture, for example. This affords individuals the autonomy to decide whether, when and where they will engage with previous trauma.

  Some other examples of topics which may require a content warning include but are not limited to:

  ➢ drug and alcohol abuse.
  ➢ sexual assault.
  ➢ Abuse.
  ➢ suicide and self-harm.

  Depending on the context, it may be appropriate to inform students in advance if content may be triggering, and this can be done via email.

The following section will offer examples of inclusive language specific to different protected characteristics.

Age

It is important to be aware of the connotations of language used when referring to age. Oftentimes, language used to refer to older people can carry connotations of fragility, whilst language used to refer to younger people can imply a lack of maturity and awareness. In both cases, the language often used is patronising and contributes to negative stereotypes. Where possible, try to be specific when referring to someone's age, but if there is a context in which you must generalise an age-group, follow these tips below:

Tips	Instead of…	Try…
Use person centred language when referring to people of different age groups. Do not make generalisations about a group of people based on their age.	• The elderly, OAPs. • The young. • Old people cannot use technology. • Millennial snowflakes.	• Older person, older adult, older people, elderly person, elderly people. • Young person, young adults. • There is no alternative to either of these phrases, as both contribute to negative age-based stereotypes. Be specific about the person to whom you are referring.
Avoid using infantilising statements when referring to adults.	• Boys, Girls, Men, Women.	• Everybody, People.

Disability

The term disability refers to 'A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial or long-term effect on someone's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.' This includes not only physical health conditions but also autism, mental health conditions, learning disabilities, and other non-visible disabilities that are not immediately obvious.

'Disablism' is discrimination or prejudice against disabled people, and 'Ableism' is discrimination in favour of non-disabled people. It is important to avoid perpetuating ableist attitudes in the language that we use. Certain words and their meanings have changed over time, but this does not mean that they cannot still reinforce stereotypes and contribute to discrimination. In any case, it is important to check in with the individual regarding their disability and ask for their preferences for the language used to describe their disability.

Tips	Instead of…	Try…
Avoid language that frames disability around victimhood.	• Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound • Afflicted by, suffers from, A victim of…	• Person who uses a wheelchair or wheelchair user • Has (name of condition or impairment).
Avoid using outmoded terms that perpetuate ableism and reinforce negative stereotypes.	• Lame, idiot, nuts, psycho.	• Use the terminology preferred by the person or group being addressed.
Avoid using language that trivialises mental health issues.	• Crazy, mad, insane, psycho. • Mentally handicapped.	• Has mental health problems / mental ill health (Psychotic is only to be used in relation to symptoms of psychosis, not as a general description). • Has a learning disability (singular) or with learning disabilities (plural).

	• An epileptic, diabetic, depressive.	• A person with epilepsy, diabetes, depression, or someone who has epilepsy, diabetes, depression.
Avoid homogenising groups.	• The disabled. • The blind. • The deaf.	• Disabled people. • Blind or partially sighted people, visually impaired people. • Deaf people or the deaf community.
Avoid using euphemisms.	• Special, special needs.	• Person with learning differences.
Avoid using terms that position disabled people in opposition to a 'norm'.	• Normal, healthy. • Handicapped. • Mentally ill, mental patient, insane, mad.	• Non-disabled, a person without a disability or does not have a disability*. • Disabled or people with health conditions or impairments. • Person with a mental health condition.
Avoid using words that can be insulting and degrading.	• Deaf and dumb, deaf-mute. • A dwarf, midget.	• Deaf, user of British Sign Language (BSL), person with a hearing impairment. • Someone with restricted growth or short stature.

*Able-bodied - this term is used to describe someone who does not identify as having a disability. Some members of the disability community oppose its use because it implies that all people with disabilities lack "able bodies" or the ability to use their bodies well. They may prefer "non-disabled" or "enabled" as being more accurate.

NCDJ Recommendation: The term "non-disabled" and the phrases "does not have a disability" or "is not living with a disability" are more neutral choices. "Able-bodied" is an appropriate term to use in some cases, such as when referring to government reports on the proportion of able-bodied members in the workforce. In some cases, the word "typical" can be used to describe a non-disabled condition, although be aware that some in the disability community object to its use.

Race, Ethnicity and Nationality

The University is an ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse institution and it is important that the language we use reflects this. As a rule, avoid language that generalises, homogenises, or perpetuates stereotypes about a specific group. Do not mention someone's racial identity unless it is relevant to the conversation and remember that ethnic identities are not exclusive to people of colour: everyone has an ethnicity. There are important differences between the terminologies Race and Ethnicity (please see here).

In the UK, the term 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' has commonly been used to describe all those who do not identify as White British and may also include those who describe themselves as 'White other'. However, the term has limitations, and negative connotations of not representing specific ethnic and cultural groups accurately, therefore, it is important to bear these in mind when using this term.

These limitations include:

- Implying that Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic individuals are a homogeneous group.

- Singling out specific ethnic groups, this can be divisive and exclusionary.

- It can be perceived as a convenient label that is placed on minority ethnic groups of people, rather than identities with which people have chosen to identify.

- It is generally perceived that these terms refer only to people who are not White, which does not consider White minority ethnic groups (people of mixed heritage, Roma, Gypsies and Travellers).

- Mixed heritage, mixed race or dual heritage may describe someone who has parents of different ethnicities; however, be careful not to presume how somebody identifies or defines themselves.

Recommended Terminology at the University of Brighton

In recognition of the above issues, the university set up a Race Terminology Group in 2021 with a remit to agree what terminology to use at the university. Following a survey of staff and students about preferred terminology, the Terminology Group recommended using the term 'Minority Ethnic' as its preferred term.

Click here to read the meeting notes.

Tips	Instead of…	Try…
Use person centred language.	• The Japanese.	• Japanese People
Avoid using homogenising language. Where possible, be specific.	• He is Asian.	• Asia is a continent that encompasses over four billion people, and therefore it is important to be specific when referring to someone from this continent. You could replace 'Asian' with a more specific descriptor: 'South Asian' or 'East/South-East Asian'
Avoid using language that is white or western-centric, and positions people of other races and ethnicities in relation to whiteness.	• Non-white.	• People of Colour or the racially minoritised community.
Avoid irrelevant ethnic descriptions.	• The Black doctor.	• The doctor.

Avoid using language that implies otherness or suggests that someone's race correlates with their nationality or cultural background.	• 'Where are you *really* from?'	• This is not appropriate because it makes assumptions about individuals based on their race and implies a lack of belonging.
Do not use outmoded descriptors.	• Third world countries / Developing countries.	• Be specific about the country or region to which you are referring.

Religion and Belief

Religion is a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldviews that relate humanity to spirituality and, sometimes, to moral values. Many religions have narratives, symbols, traditions, and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to life or to explain the origin of life or the universe. They tend to derive morality, ethics, religious laws, or a preferred lifestyle from their ideas about the cosmos and human nature.

Belief is a state of the mind when we consider something true even though we are not 100% sure or able to prove it. Everybody has beliefs about life and the world they experience. Mutually supportive beliefs may form belief systems, which may be religious, philosophical, or ideological. It is also broadly accepted that, for example, humanism, atheism, and agnosticism are beliefs.

Whilst inappropriate language and discrimination can be targeted at people with any faith or no faith, the most common forms of discrimination in the UK on the grounds of religion and belief are:

Islamophobia

Islamophobia, is the fear and hatred of Islam, resulting in discrimination against Muslims or people associated with Islam. Islam is the most widespread religion in Europe after Christianity. The hostility towards Islam as a religion and to Muslim people, particularly following the "wars on terror", has revealed deep-rooted prejudices against Muslims in many societies. With the perception of the religion of Islam as being associated only with terrorism and extremism, Islamophobia has contributed to negative views of Islam and Muslims, wrongly generalising militant religious extremism and ultra-conservatism onto all Muslim countries and Muslim people.

Antisemitism

Antisemitism is the hostility towards Jews as a religious or minority group often accompanied by social, economic, and political discrimination – is an example of the combination of racism and religious discrimination. Even though the direct targets of antisemitism are Jewish people, the motivation for discrimination and violence is not necessarily based on Judaism as a religion but on Jews as a people.

Tips	Instead of…	Try…
Do not make generalisations about a group of people based on their religion, belief, or faith.	• All Jews are… • All Muslims are… • All Christians are… • They are all…	There is no alternative to these kinds of phrases as they all contribute to sweeping stereotypes about people with different faiths. Be specific about the person you are referring to.
Avoid irrelevant religious descriptions.	• The Muslim teacher.	• The teacher.
When writing about groups of individuals within the same religious group, avoid homogenising language.	• The Muslim Community. • The Jewish Community. • The Sikh Community etc…	• Muslim communities. • Jewish communities. • Sikh communities etc…
When referring to countries with a majority religion or faith, use language that recognises that not everyone in that country shares that religion or faith.	• A Muslim country. • A Christian country.	• A majority-Muslim country. • A majority-Christian country.
Be aware that the terms 'religion', 'faith' and 'belief' can mean different things to different people and that people may relate to one but not the others.	• When referring to a particular individual, avoid making assumptions	Use the language with which individuals identify themselves.

For instance, someone may hold beliefs or faith without belonging to a particular religion.	about their preferences.	If you are unsure, ask them what they would prefer.
Avoid using Christian-centric language.	- What is your Christian name? - Christmas closure period.	- What is your first name? / What is your given name? - Winter closure period.

Sex, Gender, and Gender Identity

As a rule, it is good practice to get into the habit of stating your own pronouns when you introduce yourself, and by the same token, asking others for their pronouns upon introduction.

This can take the form of, 'My name is ___ and I use she/her pronouns,' and 'Do you mind me asking what pronouns you use?' If you do not feel comfortable disclosing your pronouns in a verbal context, you can also wear a visual prompt – pronoun badges are available to be collected from the Equality and Diversity office; please contact equality@brighton.ac.uk for details.

Never assume that someone's gender identity is correlative with their outward expression. A person does not have to have undergone any form of gender reassignment surgery to be trans: a person's gender identity is predicated on the way they feel internally and the way that they outwardly present is irrelevant. Avoid using language that implies that trans people have not always been trans.

For example, it is always inappropriate to say, 'When you were *x gender/ x name.'*

Gender Identity:
Gender identity is one's personal sense of their gender. This may either correlate with or differ from the sex that they were assigned at birth.

Queer:
'Queer' is an umbrella term referring to anyone who identifies as LGBTQ+. People may use the term 'Queer' in conjunction or interchangeably with another sexual/gender identity such as 'Lesbian,' or it can stand as an identity. Historically, this term has pejorative roots, and as such the word 'Queer' should be used sensitively and appropriately by people who do not identify in this way – see here for Stonewalls glossary of terms.

Trans/Transgender:
This term refers to anyone whose gender identity differs from that which they were assigned at birth. Transitioning refers to the process that a trans person may undergo so that their gender expression is correlative with that of their gender identity. Social transitioning may include a change of name, pronouns, and outward expression, whereas a medical transition may involve physical changes, such as undertaking hormone therapy or physical modifications. A trans person may choose to undergo several - or none of - these processes. If they decide not to, this does not invalidate their trans identity in any way.

Cis/Cisgender:
This refers to anyone whose gender identity or expression is the same as that which they were assigned at birth.

Non-Binary, Gender Diverse, Gender Queer:
Non-binary identities refer to individuals whose gender identity falls outside of the gender binary of male and female. Non-Binary may refer to someone who identifies as both male and female simultaneously, neither male nor female, or someone who fluctuates between both. Non-binary individuals can fall under the 'trans' umbrella as their gender identity differs from that which they were assigned at birth. 'Non-Binary' can also act as an umbrella term, relating to all individuals who do not align themselves with binary notions of gender.

Dead Name:
Some trans people take on a new name that represents their gender identity. 'Dead name' refers to the individual's previous name that they no longer wish to use or be referred to as. It is always inappropriate to refer to someone using their dead-name, whether administrative systems are up-to-date or not.

Tips	Instead of…	Try…
When referring to people's relationships with others, try to use gender neutral terms.	• Mother/ Father. • Daughter/ Son. • Girlfriend/Boyfriend/Wife/ Husband.	• Parent. • Child. • Partner, Spouse.
Avoid using language that implies that gender is binary.	• Opposite sex. • Ladies and Gentlemen.	• Different/ Another sex. • Folks/ Friends and Colleagues/ Everyone.

If you are unsure of someone's pronouns, use gender neutral pronouns.	- He/ Him/ His. - She/ Her/ Hers. - Woman/ Man.	They / Them / Theirs: This can be used in the singular. For example: 'They went to their house…' Alternatively, use a person's name when referring to them.
Avoid using outmoded terms.	Pre-op/ Post-op, Transvestite.	A trans person.
Avoid using expressions that imply that gender identity is a choice.	'What are your preferred pronouns?'	'What pronouns do you use?'
When referring to someone's occupation or title, avoid using gendered language.	- Policeman, Policewoman. - Chairman, Chairwoman.	- Police Officer. - Chairperson or Chair.
Avoid using patronising terms when referring to people of a particular gender.	Girls/ Ladies/ Son.	People, person's name.
Recognise the difference between gender and sexual orientation.	- Avoid using 'LGBTQ+' if you are only referring to gender identity. - Avoid using 'straight' as the opposite of 'Queer' or 'LGBTQ+'.	Only use LGBTQ+ if you are referring to the community. Queer and LGBTQ+ also refer to gender identity. They are both umbrella terms 'straight' are not the opposite of either of these terms. Straight cisgendered would be accurate.

Avoid using phrases that imply the gender of the person, as these are exclusionary.	• 'Manning the desk' • Addressing a room of people as 'guys'	• Working on the desk. • 'Hello colleagues'

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to a person's sexual, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. This encompasses people who are attracted to others of the same gender, to those of different genders, or to those of all/multiple genders.

Tips	Instead of…	Try…
Avoid using language that suggests that sexual orientation is a choice.	• Lifestyle choice, preference.	• Sexual orientation.
Do not assume the gender of someone's partner. By the same token, do not assume a person's sexuality based on the gender of their partner.	• Boyfriend/Girlfriend/Husband/ Wife. • '*X person is straight because they have a boyfriend*'	• Partner/ Spouse. • Assuming the sexual orientation of someone based on the gender of their partner excludes bisexual and pansexual people.
Acknowledge diverse family formations.	• Mother and Father.	• Parents / Caregivers.

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