Equality & Diversity

Positive Use of Language

Guidelines for Staff and Students

UNIVERSITY OF BATH
This leaflet is produced to assist in the pursuit of corporate aims of supporting equality and diversity and striving for understanding and mutual support within the University community.

Positive Use of Language

University of Bath’s approach to equality of opportunity

This University strives to ensure that all students, members of staff and visitors are treated in a professional manner and with respect. This is reflected in the policies, procedures and practices of the University. It applies regardless of race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status, gender status, religion or belief, disability status or impairment, family circumstances, HIV status or any other unlawful or unfair treatment.
The power of language

Language has powerful social and political effects and meanings; the connotations and significance of words also change, so any user of language should be sensitive to how words may affect different groups. We need to be aware of the potential of words to exclude and devalue people.

This leaflet has two main purposes:

a) to raise awareness about language use – to illustrate how this can foster, or detract from, a culture of respect and equality in the University;

b) to promote good practice thus helping us to implement the University’s policies to promote equality of opportunity and fair treatment.

Please treat the contents of this leaflet in the spirit in which they are offered. These guidelines are intended as examples of good practice. They are designed to raise awareness, rather than be prescriptive, and are regularly reviewed and revised to ensure that they are relevant and appropriate.
Language not only reflects attitudes; it also helps to define them. We all have an obligation to use words, phrases and images that do not reinforce offensive or discriminatory attitudes and to avoid terms that belittle, ignore or insult individuals or groups. Language is not value-free; it is value-laden. For example, think of the negative images words like ‘hanger-on’, ‘traveller’ and ‘mother-in-law’ can create when used in certain contexts.

Any bias in language has direct implications for equal opportunities practice in all aspects of our lives, including our working environment. Far from being a form of censorship, bias-free language can be a conscious choice on the part of all staff and students, to ensure that offence is not caused by the use of language which may patronise or undermine others e.g. use positive terms such as ‘support staff’ rather than ‘non-academic staff’.
It may be helpful to consider language guidelines under the following headings:

**Race**

- We are all members of the human race.
- Everyone belongs to an ‘ethnic group’ and may be either in an ethnic majority or an ethnic minority group. The word ‘ethnic’ used alone to describe someone’s racial origin is therefore meaningless.
- Where it is relevant to refer to a person’s cultural background, use the term preferred by the individual, e.g. Asian, African-Caribbean, Chinese etc.
- Use ‘mixed heritage’ rather than ‘half caste’.
- Do not assume that a person’s appearance defines their nationality or cultural background.
- Do not automatically use a person’s ethnic origin/culture to describe them.
Religion and Belief

• Avoid making assumptions about individuals based on religion and belief.

• Do not assume that a person’s appearance defines their religion or belief.

• Use terms such as ‘forename’, ‘given name’ or ‘personal name’ rather than ‘Christian name’.

• Avoid using terms which may offend people’s religious sensibilities.

Gender

• Avoid gender dominated language such as he/him/his to refer to both sexes. You may wish to consider language that covers both, e.g. s/he.

• The generic use of the word ‘man’ when referring to both males and females in the general sense is no longer acceptable. Choose neutral alternatives such as ‘humanity’, ‘humans’, or ‘people’.

• Terms like ‘policeman’ imply that the occupation is exclusively male. Use terms such as ‘police officer’, ‘fire-fighter’ and ‘sales assistant’.

• Take care not to use different adjectives to describe the same characteristic in men and women as this denotes bias e.g. strong men or dominating women.
Sexual Orientation

• Do not make the assumption that everyone has the same sexuality.

• Where relevant, use the term preferred by the individual, e.g. ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, or ‘bisexual’ rather than a blanket ‘homosexual’.

• Use the term ‘partner’ instead of ‘spouse’, unless you know the person is married.

• Avoid heterosexist language – assuming that everyone is heterosexual e.g. avoid using ‘us’ and ‘them’ terminology when discussing issues around sexuality.

• Avoid implying that lesbians, bisexuals and gay men are less fortunate, unhappy, or present a ‘problem’ or that these forms of sexuality constitute abnormality or illness.
Trans people

- Trans people is a more recent term used to embrace both ‘transgendered’ and ‘transsexual’. The pressure group Press for Change advocates ‘trans’ as the adjective to describe people, “who, in expressing their sense of identity, come into conflict with the contemporary gender behaviour norms of their society. Please remember that trans people, transsexual people, transgender people ... or whatever description you use ... are people first, and the ‘T’ adjective describes only one of the many interesting and individual characteristics which make up that person.”

Age

- Language should reflect that both young and older people are independent and contribute to society.

- Referring to an individual’s age should be avoided unless it is specifically relevant. Where it is relevant to identify age, do not use terms that are demeaning or make assumptions about physical or intellectual capacity.

- Avoid negative stereotypes such as ‘kids’, ‘pensioners’ and ‘geriatric’ and instead use terms such as ‘older people’ and ‘students’.
Disability

People should not be defined in terms of any disability or impairment they may have:

• When referring to a disability, physical, sensory or unseen impairment, check with the individual how they wish it to be described.

• Avoid being patronising by implying that people with a disability or impairment are less fortunate or unhappy, or present a ‘problem’.

• Avoid any implication that a physical disability implies a mental disability e.g. ‘Does s/he take sugar?’

• Avoid terms that define the disability has a limitation e.g. ‘confined to a wheelchair’. The term ‘wheelchair user’ is preferred.

• Use the term ‘people with disabilities’ or ‘disabled people’ rather than ‘the disabled’ or ‘the handicapped’ as it recognises that a disability is only one characteristic of an individual rather than a general lack of ability. We are all differently abled.
Forms of address

There are a number of terms that may give offence to female staff and students and which may signal that they are not being taken seriously:

- Wherever possible check with the individual how they wish to be addressed i.e. Mrs, Miss or Ms.

- Use first name, neutral role description, academic title or no title. Avoid using different forms of address for women and men which are discriminatory. Instead, where titles are appropriate, use parallel titles e.g. Ms is parallel to Mr.

- Avoid derogatory/patronising terms such as ‘girls’, ‘dear’, ‘ladies’, except where the equivalent male term is being used.

Try to use inclusive terms which do not make gender distinctions.

**Instead of:**
- Chairman/Madam chairman
- Hostess
- Lady Doctor
- Cleaning lady
- Best man for the job

**Use:**
- Chair/Chairperson
- Host
- Doctor
- Cleaner
- Best person for the job
Visual Imagery is a form of language

Publications, displays, posters, and teaching material alone can not redress inequalities in society but they should not reinforce and perpetuate stereotypical assumptions and beliefs. It is important to include positive images of women as well as men, people of all ethnic/racial/religious backgrounds, people with disabilities as well as people of all sexualities. A wide variety of people should be portrayed in positions of power, authority and status.

The wheelchair is used as the disability symbol but should not limit our perception of disability to wheelchair users. Many disabilities are ‘invisible’ such as hearing or visual impairment, ME and learning difficulties such as dyslexia.
Further Information

For further information or to offer feedback on any of the points raised in this leaflet please contact:

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