



# **Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion**

## **Inclusive Language & Image Guide**

**November 2022**

# Contents

|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Background .....                     | 1  |
| Overview .....                       | 1  |
| Protected Characteristics .....      | 3  |
| Age.....                             | 3  |
| Disability.....                      | 4  |
| Mental Health.....                   | 6  |
| Neurodiversity.....                  | 7  |
| Race & Ethnicity.....                | 8  |
| Religion or Belief .....             | 11 |
| Sex .....                            | 12 |
| Gender .....                         | 13 |
| Sexual Orientation .....             | 15 |
| Intersectionality.....               | 17 |
| Resources & Further Information..... | 18 |

# Background

## Overview

The Open University's mission is to be open to people, places, methods, and ideas. The Open University strives to create an environment where we bring our mission to life – where we respect each other and embrace and celebrate difference. The way we speak to people, and write for and about them, impacts on how they feel in terms of inclusion and belonging.

This guidance has been developed to reflect The Open University Strategy Equity Goal, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Plan, and contemporary EDI terminology. It is available to download from the staff Intranet.

This guide is based on good practice in the UK, and we have used the most widely accepted terminology in current society. The terms used are by no means exhaustive. We acknowledge that terminology in these areas is varied, fluid and constantly shifting as understanding, perceptions and use of language changes and develops. Language can also differ between cultures and within the protected characteristics.

It is also important to remember that when working with individuals or groups of individuals, you need to be guided by them about the language they may prefer to use and to self-define themselves.

Remember that our colleagues and others we encounter may need time to learn, adjust, and adapt to keep up to date with societal changes and shifts in language. We encourage patience and understanding as people endeavour to use inclusive language and imagery.

When using the guidance throughout this document, we encourage you to remember the importance of greater representation of all groups and the ways in which people live their lives, regardless of age, race, disability status, gender identity or other protected characteristics.

We recognise that this guidance will require regular review to ensure it aligns with the accepted terminology of the time. It will be reviewed annually and revised, where necessary, to reflect updated terminology. We welcome your comments and suggestions for improving this guide – please send your feedback by email to [edi-team@open.ac.uk](mailto:edi-team@open.ac.uk).

Contacts and information for the EDI Team:

Intranet:

[Equality at the OU | The Open University Equality and Diversity](#)

Email:

[edi-team@open.ac.uk](mailto:edi-team@open.ac.uk)

# Protected Characteristics

## Age

### Language

Only refer to age if it is relevant, e.g., where courses or funding are available for a particular age group, or when writing about specific age groups for module content. When creating module content, it is good practice to include representation from across the different age groups in our society.

Use terms that are objective, for example:

- ▶ Child (4-12 years)
- ▶ Young people/young adults (13-18 years)
- ▶ Adults (19-64 years)
- ▶ Older people/adults (55+ years)
- ▶ Over 65s/75s etc.

Avoid using terms to describe an individual or a group that imply a particular age group is more or less able, e.g., mature workforce or young and vibrant team.

Avoid using terms relating to chronological age that imply everyone in the age band is a homogeneous group, e.g., youngsters, middle-aged, elderly, pensioners, or OAPs (old age pensioners).

### Imagery

When choosing imagery for communications or publications, it is important to be aware of the message that they portray. Try to choose images that depict all age groups as rounded individuals and take care to avoid perpetuating stereotypes, such as young people being 'carefree' or older people as 'frail'. Also, be aware that symbols can perpetuate stereotypes (e.g., road signs showing older people with walking sticks), so consider whether using them is necessary.

The Open University has a wealth of images in its asset bank, which can be accessed here [[Asset Bank \(ouassetbank.co.uk\)](https://ouassetbank.co.uk)].

# Disability

## Language

The portrayal of people with disabilities has traditionally used language that emphasises the disability rather than the person, resulting in the depersonalisation, stereotyping and amalgamation of whole spectrums of specific physical and mental impairments.

The social model of disability believes people are disabled by society, for example, where buildings do not have accessible toilets. This contrasts with the medical model, which emphasises that people are disabled by their impairments or differences.

By using the social model, we use language that places the focus on people's abilities, helping to reduce the sense of depersonalisation and stereotyping. When talking about disability, we try to avoid a deficit-model approach whereby people are portrayed in terms of "deficiencies" or "limitations".

Terms to use include:

- › Disabled person
- › Person with a disability
- › Person living with cancer
- › Person living with dementia
- › Person with diabetes
- › Blind person
- › Person with visual impairment
- › Deaf person – it should be noted that D/deaf people may view themselves as a cultural or linguistic minority, and it is important to be respectful of this identity
- › Person with hearing impairment
- › Mobility-aid user (this can include wheelchairs, walking sticks, crutches, mobility scooters etc.)

It is also helpful to be aware of the language we use when talking about facilities, e.g.,

- › Accessible toilets
- › Accessible lifts
- › Accessible parking/spaces

Avoid using terms that act as collectives, imply a disabled person is 'suffering', or carry negative connotations, e.g.,

- › Diabetics
- › Handicapped

- › Wheelchair-bound
- › Suffering from cancer
- › Victim of dementia
- › Able-bodied

Avoid the following terms when talking about facilities:

- › Disabled toilets
- › Disabled lifts
- › Disabled parking/spaces

Avoid being effusive about the achievements of disabled people when they are going about their daily work, for example, courageous, inspiring, or heroic. Instead, use terms such as successful or productive.

We encourage you to avoid using ableist language, which is language that reduces people to their disability. Ableist language also encourages stigmatisation and promotes a lack of understanding.

Avoid terms/phrases such as:

- › “Falling on deaf ears.”
- › Dumb
- › Lame
- › Describing someone as “crippled” by something

## Imagery

Use positive images of disabled people to illustrate your text where the disability is incidental to the activity the person is doing, rather than as an example of a disability. Use images that portray a variety of disabled people – do not always select a wheelchair user. For example, images portraying the Sunflower lanyard, mobility aids, or JAM cards\*.

\*JAM cards or “Just A Minute” cards are available in Northern Ireland to “allow people with a hidden disability or communication barrier to tell others that they need extra time and understanding in a private and easy way.” For more information, please visit: [Just a minute of patience | JAM Card | Autism | Hidden disability | Northern Ireland](#)

# Mental Health

## Language

Everyone has mental health and the ways in which we experience it are unique to each of us. Given everyone's individual experience, it is important that the language we use reflects sensitivity and a person-centred approach. This avoids positive or negative labelling that defines people by a condition, which can lead to biases and stereotypes. Within some cultural contexts, the term "mental health" can be particularly problematic. Try to consider the cultural complexities and stigmatisation that exist around "mental health", and the need for sensitivity when talking about this subject.

When referring to people with mental health issues, we always put the person before the condition.

Terms to use include:

- › Person with anxiety
- › Person with depression
- › Mental health problems
- › Mental health issues
- › Mental health conditions
- › Person experiencing depression

Avoid terms such as:

- › Mental disorder
- › Mental illness
- › Struggles with depression
- › Suffers from anxiety
- › Mental health crisis
- › Mental health breakdown

## Imagery

Be careful not to perpetuate the stigma that exists around mental health by using stereotypical imagery, such as someone holding their head in their hands. Remember to represent the whole person – not just the times when they are experiencing mental health issues. It is about storytelling and depicting a range of emotions.

# Neurodiversity

## Language

Neurodiversity relates to the fact that no two brains are exactly alike. This variety in our biological make-up results in natural differences in communication skills, problem-solving and creative insights. Autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) are all included in the range of neurodivergence. Understanding and appreciating these normal differences emphasises the importance of not using medicalised or negative language in association with neurodiversity.

- › Neurotypical: this describes someone who exhibits brain functions, behaviours, and processing considered standard and typical.
- › Neurodivergent/neurodivergence: this term is used for people whose brains function differently from what is considered standard or typical, and this can be in one or more ways.

Terms to use include:

- › Person who is neurodivergent
- › Person who is autistic
- › Person who is on the autistic spectrum
- › Person with dyslexia (affecting the way people process information, which can be reflected in reading, writing, spelling, and organisation skills)
- › Person with dyspraxia (affecting physical co-ordination)
- › Person with dyscalculia (affecting understanding of numbers)

Avoid using the following terms:

- › Autistic spectrum disorder (Please note; autistic spectrum is fine, but 'disorder' is offensive to some autistic people).
- › High functioning/low functioning (unless a person with autism is using it about themselves).
- › Dyslexic

## Imagery

Be careful not to perpetuate stigmas that may exist around neurodiversity by using stereotypical imagery.

# Race & Ethnicity

## Language

Race and ethnicity are often regarded as the same thing – both are social constructs used to categorise and characterise at an individual and group level. While there can be overlap between the two terms, it is helpful to understand the difference and how this impacts inclusive language. Race is a culturally structured systematic definition of dividing humankind into categories often around ancestry, and physical characteristics, such as skin colour, and hair texture. Ethnicity often refers to nationality or common cultural factors, such as language, religious belief, and dress code.

The Open University operates across racialised, and culturally diverse landscapes and it is important not to assume that a person's appearance defines their cultural background or nationality.

We only refer to a person's race or ethnicity to identify or describe them if it is directly relevant to information being communicated. Be aware of the sensitivity and context for capitalising categories. In general, the following terms should be used (but academic writing may call for specific capitalisation):

- ▶ Broad ethnicity – Black, Asian, and White (not Caucasian). Black and Asian should be capitalised when writing, and White is capitalised for data categorisation.
- ▶ Specific ethnicity: Black African, Black Caribbean, Chinese, Indian, White British should be capitalized.
- ▶ 'Minority (or Minoritised) Ethnic group', rather than 'minority group'
- ▶ When referring to people with more than one heritage, you need to be specific, e.g., people of Black African and W/white heritage.

You may be familiar with the acronym BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic), or the acronym BME (Black & Minority Ethnic), which are used to refer to all ethnic groups except White British. Please **not** use them outside this context. Instead, use the term in full each time it is used, even when you are presenting or talking about data i.e., Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic.

The BAME acronym is problematic because:

- ▶ The term generalises people as a "catch all" homogeneous group, without acknowledgement or appreciation of their identities, complexities, individual ethnicities and lived experiences.

- › It is not clear which specific minority ethnic groups are included. Some references mean all minority ethnic groups, which would include White Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups. Others, however, include White minority ethnic groups in the 'White' category.

The term Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic should only be used where absolutely necessary. Otherwise, we advise you to be as specific as possible about the individual or group you are speaking about.

Avoid using the terms People of Colour (POC) and Indigenous People of Colour (IPOC).

Use terminology that different groups use to describe themselves, such as Inuit and Native American.

You should not need to ask someone what their ethnicity is unless it is required in specific instances, such as data categorisation and collection purposes or "alt text" descriptions (used to describe images and diagrams for accessibility reasons). If you are unsure of a person's ethnicity and do require this information, simply ask them, 'How do you describe your ethnicity?'

Avoid using the following terms:

- › Collective nouns such as Asians and Blacks. Instead, use Asian people or Black people.
- › Foreign students/staff. Instead, use international students/staff.
- › Minority group. Instead, use Minority/Minoritised Ethnic Group.
- › Non-white
- › Irrelevant ethnic descriptions such as the Asian doctor. Instead, just use doctor.
- › Blacklist (which reinforces the bias that black is bad). Instead, use deny list.
- › Whitelist (which reinforces the bias that white is good). Instead, use safe list or allow list.

It should be noted that the terms "Blacklist" and "Whitelist" are frequently used in IT and Computing. It is important to appreciate the context in which these terms may need to be used, and where they should be avoided.

The Open University is a four Nations University, which means people may identify as English, Irish, Scottish, or Welsh. For this reason, it is important not to use singular terms such as 'the country' or 'the government'. Using the word British can also be problematic, due to the history of colonialism and the political divisions that exist in some Nations within the UK.

At The Open University, we actively avoid racist language and challenge racial and ethnic slurs that infer or endorse stereotypes based upon racial or ethnic associations. The Open University's anti-racism statement can be found at the link below:

[Open University Anti-Racism Statement | About The Open University](#)

## Imagery

Select images that represent the diverse and multicultural world around us. Be careful not to include images that assign Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people to stereotyped occupations or those that imply a low status or position.

When you need to reference a particular person in an image, do not use race/ethnicity unless for alt text purposes. Instead, try to guide viewers to the person you are referencing by describing their location in the image, such as "the third person from the left."

# Religion or Belief

## Language

'Religion or belief' is the term used in equality and human rights legislation, including the Equality Act 2010 (England, Scotland and Wales) and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It incorporates any religion or belief, provided it has a clear structure and belief system. It also includes non-belief and a philosophical belief, which applies to an important aspect of human life or behaviour.

A person's religion or belief cannot be assumed by their name or their ethnicity. It is also worth remembering that observation and expression of religion or belief is personal to each person.

A person's religion or belief should only be referred to if it is relevant to the information being communicated, e.g., official forms.

The names of religions and religious groups should always be written in upper case e.g., Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, etc. Where you need to define groups of individuals from the same religion, refer to them as a community, e.g., members of the Muslim community or Jewish people.

Terms to avoid:

- ▶ Christian name. Instead, use given name. (First name can be confusing to some Asian people, who place their family name first.)
- ▶ Surname and last name. (Last name can be confusing to some Asian people, who place their family name first.) Instead, use family name or preferred name. (Where the 'legal name' is needed in things like surveys, add a box for both 'legal' and 'known as'.)
- ▶ Faith. Instead, use religion or belief.

## Imagery

It is important to recognise that there are over 4,000 recognised religions in the world. Whilst these cannot be shown in any single image, try to show the diversity of religion and beliefs, without bias or stereotyping.

# Sex

## Language

Sex relates to genes, reproductive organs and hormones inherited at birth.

Historically, sex has been understood to mean “male” or “female”; however, we now understand that some people are born with natural variations to sex characteristics.

Terms to consider:

- › Intersex. This term can be considered outdated, so instead consider using “variations to sex characteristics.”

# Gender

## Language

Language is constantly evolving, and it is important to understand and appreciate the differences between 'sex' and 'gender', as they are not the same. Sex (male, female or variations of sex characteristics) relates to genes, reproductive organs and hormones inherited at birth. Gender can be fixed or fluid and refers to our internal sense of who we are and how we see and describe ourselves. Our gender identity can be very important to who we are as a person, and so it is important to be considerate and sensitive when talking about and using language relating to sex and/or gender.

Gender expression is the way a person socially expresses their gender identity and interacts with the world around them, typically through their appearance, and dress.

Binary gender terms (man/woman, girl/boy) have traditional associations with sex. We now recognise that some people identify with a gender different to the one assigned to them at birth (trans), whilst others identify neither as men nor women (non-binary or genderfluid).

Be mindful of where we have an impulse to use a gendered term in a context where gender is irrelevant. For example, use "chair" rather than "chairman". This is more inclusive of trans people, but also helps to push against stereotypes around positions of power primarily being occupied by men.

You will find that most occupations and roles do not require a gender-definition. For example, police officer rather than policeman/policewoman, and firefighter rather than fireman.

Try to avoid cishnorms, which imply gender is a binary construct that is derived from 'sex'.

- › Cisgender: a person whose gender identity corresponds with the gender they were assigned at birth.
- › Cishnorms/cishnormativity: the assumption that cisgender is the 'norm', which often results in favouring/privileging this over other forms of gender identity.

If you are unsure about which gendered pronouns are appropriate for an individual, it is best to ask (where necessary) and be respectful of their preferred pronouns. Sometimes, people write their pronouns on their e-signatures, e.g., he/his, she/her or they/them.

Try to avoid using titles such as “Mr”, “Mrs”, “Sir” or “Madam”, as these terms also assume a person’s gender identity.

## Imagery

It is important to avoid reinforcing gender roles and gender stereotypes through images, e.g., by only showing men in higher positions or certain types of occupations, such as engineer. It is also important to acknowledge sex and gender identity outside the binary – ensure trans, gender-fluid, and non-binary people are also represented in imagery. When representing non-binary people, try to avoid just selecting images with stylish, androgenous looking models. Instead, try to use imagery more representative of our diverse society.

# Sexual Orientation

## Language

Sexual orientation refers to a person's physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another individual, whether towards people of the same sex, opposite sex or both. Sexual orientations include asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, questioning and straight.

Sexuality should only be mentioned when and where it is relevant. For example, you may have seen job postings that aim to increase applications from sexual or gender minorities under the LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans) orientations.

Only use the term LGBT+ when referring to both sexual orientation and gender identity-based communities. This acronym may appear in different lengths but will always be followed by a "+" sign. This is because there are several identities that the community or some members of the community choose to include.

Try to avoid terms that imply sexual and marital relations are most fitting between people of the opposite sex (known as heteronorms).

- › Heteronormativity: the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm, which favours/privileges this sexual orientation over other sexual orientations.

You may be familiar with various terminology that was once used in a derogatory way, but that has now been reclaimed by those belonging to a given community, e.g., 'Queer'. Be mindful that the same terminology and language can remain offensive and hurtful when coming from individuals either inside or outside the community. Therefore, do not assume that it is appropriate to use words and phrases because you have heard a community member use them.

Again, if you are uncertain of someone's preferred terminology, it is better to ask them and be respectful of their wishes.

Use the following terms:

- › Heterosexual people, straight people
- › Sexual orientation
- › Partner/spouse

Avoid using the following terms:

- › Heterosexuals (as a collective noun)

- › Sexual preference
- › Lifestyle choice
- › Girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife (unless you're already aware of a person's gender identity)

It is important to be aware that 'straight' is not the opposite of LGBT+. Trans people can be any sexual orientation, including 'straight'.

## Imagery

Try to use inclusive imagery that represents different communities within society. Avoid using stereotypes, such as the 'nuclear family' concept.

# Intersectionality

This theory was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw. It refers to “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups to produce and sustain complex inequities.” (American Psychological Association, 2021)

It is important to be aware that protected characteristics such as those in this guide (gender, race, disability etc.) may not be isolated, but rather overlapping and need to be considered when thinking about how inequalities and stereotypes persist. Therefore, in terms of inclusive language and imagery, remember to think about intersectionality and the impact it can have on a person’s lived experience.



*Kimberlé Crenshaw*

*Professor at the University of California and Los Angeles School of Law and Columbia Law School*

## Resources & Further Information

- › Inclusive Curriculum Toolkit [Inclusive Curriculum \(sharepoint.com\)](#)
- › Misgendering: What it is and how to prevent it [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - Misgendering - R Davies A King.pdf - All Documents \(sharepoint.com\)](#)
- › Equality Act 2010 [Equality Act 2010 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)
- › Section 75 Duties Northern Ireland [ECNI - Section 75 duties for Public Authorities - Equality Commission NI \(equalityni.org\)](#)
- › Social Model of Disability: Language [Social Model of Disability: Language | Disability Rights UK](#)
- › Mental Illness Is Not Invisible: A Guide to Ethical Visual Representation [Mental Illness Is Not Invisible: A Guide to Ethical Visual Representation \(shutterstock.com\)](#)
- › Inclusive Communication [Inclusive communication - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- › Use of language: race and ethnicity [Use of language: race and ethnicity | Advance HE \(advance-he.ac.uk\)](#)
- › Religion and belief [Religion and belief | Advance HE \(advance-he.ac.uk\)](#)
- › Guidelines for gender-inclusive language [UNITED NATIONS Gender-inclusive language](#)
- › LGBT+ Identities [LGBT+ Identities - The Proud Trust](#)
- › LGBT+ Inclusion: The Importance of Language and Terminology [WATCH NOW: How to be an LGBT+ Inclusive Organisation - Pearn Kandola](#)
- › [List of ethnic groups - GOV.UK \(ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk\)](#)
- › What is autism? <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism/asperger-syndrome>
- › AL Resource Page [Students with specific requirements \(sharepoint.com\)](#)