

Creating an Inclusive Online Environment

The University's policies and statements make clear that we must support and encourage free expression for all members of our community to express themselves and engage with each other. We also strive to create an equitable community, one that is diverse as well as inclusive and that is respectful and protects the human rights of its members.

This equitable community includes U of T's online platforms. Addressing harassing comments and discriminatory conduct online is essential to creating an online environment that is inclusive and equitable. Harassing conduct can include but is not limited to offensive slurs/jokes and comments, inappropriate pseudonyms, or online handles. The [University of Toronto's Equity Offices](#) remain available to students and instructors to provide support on equity issues that arise.

There are many ways to create an equitable and inclusive learning community in the online classroom environment. Being intentional about your course material and structure as an instructor can eliminate barriers and create a sense of belonging for all students.

Key Concepts:

1. Create a learning environment that is respectful and inclusive of diverse experiences and viewpoints
2. Embed equity, diversity and inclusion in your course material where appropriate
3. Be aware of deadlines for assignments, group work, tests and exams that may conflict with religious holidays or observances

Consider:

- Adding language in your course material to model an inclusive online learning environment
- Designing course activities and assessments that facilitate inclusive practices
- Scheduling deadlines for assignments, group work, tests and exams so they do not conflict with religious holidays or creed-related observances
- Encouraging students to consult U of T's equity offices if they witness or experience inappropriate comments being made or disruptive behaviour in an online class

Try This:

- Include guidance in your syllabus and Quercus course shell about the university's policies on equity, diversity, and inclusion
- Set up a [community agreement](#) with your students for the course, and include the possibility of a group agreement or team charter for any small group learning activities and/or group assessments
- Discuss what kind of online behaviours are appropriate in group discussions, and the ways that inclusive behaviour can foster learning
- Address problematic and discriminatory language and behaviour in the moment whenever possible, and invite students to reach out to you or the U of T Equity Offices should they experience or witness any forms of harassment or discrimination. Revisit expectations and agreed-upon shared communication guidelines at the next class or discussion board
- Provide images in your presentations that are diverse

- Remind students that they have a responsibility to alert members of the teaching staff in a timely manner of upcoming religious observances and anticipated absences or if accommodation requests need to be made as it relates to family status

How To:

- Remind students of the [Student Code of Conduct](#) at the beginning of the course
- In your syllabus and Quercus course shell, include the following text that reflects current academic policies:

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

- Access the [University of Toronto Media Bank](#) to find images of our community for use in your classes. Choose images that are reflective of our University of Toronto community
- Ensure discussion boards are not set to anonymous so students know they will be attributed with anything they write
- Use the following strategies to support inclusive engagement in virtual synchronous sessions:
 - Know yourself and acknowledge your own biases. You can take the Implicit Bias test here: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/takeatest.html>
 - We all have different communication styles which can be based on our backgrounds and current context - look for ways to expand your communication
 - Be mindful when putting students on the spot. Ensure you do not ask that others speak for a group that you perceive them to represent
 - Virtual synchronous sessions are made more inclusive by using students' chosen names and pronouns (he/she/they). Instructors can articulate formatting expectations for how students input their display names in online sessions (i.e. Kris-they/them)
 - Structure conversations to support equity of voice – consider giving some time for participants to process their learning individually before engaging in a whole group conversation
- Use the following strategies to invite all voices into synchronous or asynchronous conversation:
 - Set communication guidelines in advance – agreeing on shared guidelines, such as respectful communication, can create a more inclusive learning environment and allow students to explore learning moments thoughtfully
 - Allow for various types of participation and amplification of what has been communicated or to reiterate any questions
 - Ensure students are mindful of taking up more space than others, and ensure students are empowered to speak when others are dominating the conversation/discussion board

Refer students to the University of Toronto's Equity Offices for advice and support if you receive concerns of harassment and discrimination. Offices can be found at equity.hrandequity.utoronto.ca.

For More Information:

- Seek out further information about how to create an inclusive class environment by contacting the University of Toronto's Equity Offices <http://equity.hrandequity.utoronto.ca/>
- Use the [Policy on Accommodations for Religious Observances](#) when deciding dates of assignments or classes
- To help you reinforce messaging of the University's commitment to human rights and our values of diversity, inclusion, and respect, you can access the University's [Statement on Equity, Diversity and Excellence](#) on the Governing Council website.

Developed by the **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Office** with contributions from the **Office of the Vice-Provost, Innovations in Undergraduate Education** at the University of Toronto (April 14, 2020).