

Apologies

The rules governing politeness and apologies vary greatly in different cultures. Australians tend to apologise more frequently than some other cultural groups and for minor inconveniences. Some international students interpret our apologetic behaviour as “overdoing” it. In high context societies, status also governs rules of politeness and those of higher status will be treated with deference while those of lesser status will be treated dismissively, even rudely.

Greetings and Small Talk

Greeting conversation varies across cultures. Australians tend to ask “how are you?” and make comments on the weather. Other cultural groups may ask “have you eaten already?” or “where have you been?”

Australians tend to ask people their names, whereas Asians when being friendly will ask “are you married?” “and what do you earn?” “how old are you?” The touching involved in greeting behaviour also varies from culture to culture, eg handshakes (weak or strong), backslapping, hugging, cheek kissing and bowing etc. Australians say “please” “thankyou” and “sorry” more often than people from other cultures. We can be offended by the omission of these phrases. However this does not mean they are less polite and we are more polite. Each culture has its outward signs of politeness which are culturally determined. Similarly people from other cultures may ask about our incomes or cost of our homes, which we may find offensive. These questions reflect their need for more context when moving into a low context culture such as ours.

Names

Often there is very great significance attached to an international student’s name. In some cultures names are constructed to convey particular astrological or religious auspiciousness. It is imperative that we try hard to get student names and terms of address, correct. Class introductions are beneficial, not only as ice breakers but also because it is consistent with a high context cultural approach to participating in a new and unknown group situation. (Refer to section Strategies for Teachers in Meeting International Student Needs page 215, and to section Definitions of Terms, of High and Low Context page 21).

Some names are taboo for strangers to use. A general safety rule is to ask the students how to address them. Naming systems will vary between cultures e.g.

Malay

- (Male) Asmi bin Ahmad: “bin” means “son of” Ahmad (father’s given name): “bin” may be omitted and would be Mr Asmi in Australian style.
- (Female) Suraya binti Ahmad: “binti” means “daughter of” “binti” may be dropped. A Malay woman does not usually change her name on marriage, but she may take on the given name of her husband and become Mrs Asmi.

South Indian

- (Male) Kumar s/o (son of) Ramalingam: Mr Kumar.
- (Female) Shanti d/o (daughter of) Nadesan: if married to Mr Kumar she would be Mrs Kumar.