Some Cultural Considerations

Verbal & Non-Verbal Communication
Our students come from many different countries (in 2014 our international students came from over 90 different countries) and all continents, offering a wide variety of languages, customs and belief systems.

The immediate and obvious challenging aspect of cross-cultural communication is the potential language barrier. All students studying here do need to speak English, but the different accents can make communication difficult (yet also interesting) at times, unless one is used to certain accents or one gets accustomed to the person. We would recommend you speak more slowly (and possibly more clearly) than usual when meeting the student for the first time and to avoid using slang or colloquialisms, unless you can explain their meaning at the same time. Some international students, especially from an Asian background, will not ask a person to repeat something he/she has said (unless in important situation i.e at the bank, at the hospital, at work). Some will just smile.

Humour
is one human expression which is not received or understood the same way in every country. The use of certain words, as well as the cultural background, history and political situation of a certain country all play a great role in this case. In Indonesia, for instance, jokes can be made about the skin colour of other people, but not about religion.

Style
Another cross-cultural challenge is created by the different communication style. One example is the many ways ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ is expressed in different cultures. In many Asian countries with societies often based on Confucianism, such as China, disagreement is not expressed directly. It is either expressed by using certain indirect verbal expressions or by simple silence. In Indonesia, disagreement can be expressed directly, except if it might embarrass somebody present at the time of the discussion. In that case an Indonesian person would say “I don’t know”, despite having a definite opinion. For Indonesians it is generally difficult to decline being offered something, e.g. when offered food they usually cannot or do not like to eat, they will say yes because they appreciate the actual offer. In many Northern European countries, such as Germany, in contrast, disagreement is expressed directly, be it verbally (a clear ‘No’) or non-verbally (facial expression showing disagreement, possibly rising one’s voice, etc.).

Seniority
The value in a given society attributed to seniority and hence the attitude towards senior people is also an important aspect to consider in this context. Students from Asian countries, in which seniority is very much regarded and respected, will not feel comfortable to disagree with a person older than themselves because that would mean disrespect and loss of face for the latter. When asking for agreement or disagreement from a South East Asian student, we would therefore suggest to ask questions which require a longer answer than ‘Yes’, ‘Maybe’ or ‘No’ in order for them to express their opinion. Respect for elderly people and education is also very important in Muslim culture. In Indonesia, for instance, older people are addressed using ‘Mr’ or ‘Mrs’. In case the person is only slightly older, they will often be addressed using ‘Brother’ or ‘Sister’, followed by their name.

Body Language
That leads us to the other, much less obvious and therefore even more challenging aspect of cross-cultural communication, i.e. the non-verbal communication, also called body language. This can lead to many unwanted misunderstandings. In many Latin American countries, Southern Europe and Muslim countries, people can
discuss passionately and speak loudly, which is often interpreted incorrectly as ‘arguing’ by outsiders. In China, a smile can also show embarrassment. Indonesians say hello by shaking hands, whether female or male. Females greet each other by hugging, especially if they know each other yet rarely meet. Indonesian females do, however, generally not hug males. In some Muslim countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia & Iraq) males do not shake the hand of a female. In the West, a firm handshake is appreciated whereas in China, one doesn’t shake hands so firmly. Private space is very important to us, yet in a country like China, that private space is not always possible and therefore the need not as strongly perceived as in the West. The notion of ‘privacy’ is also not the same in every country. In China it is very common to ask other persons how much they earn, how much their house costs, etc.

The Concept of ‘Time’
Our life is regulated in measures of time. This universal measure is, however, perceived and interpreted very differently in many parts of the world. In Northern Europe time, such as in Switzerland, Austria and Germany, time is quintessential and people like to be punctual. In Southern Europe and Latin-America, time is interpreted in a slightly more ‘flexible’ way, i.e. social events can start significantly later than expected. This seems to be the case as well for many African and Muslim countries. In China, on the contrary, your guest might show up considerably earlier than you had expected.

Given the wide variety of our international students, we would like to suggest you use the Internet and specific publications to find out more about the given student’s country, culture and specific customs before meeting your student. The best way to learn about another culture is to engage with the student and to listen. If you do this on a regular basis you will enjoy the process, human interaction, find many more similarities than differences and also overcome any potential cultural barriers.

Gift-giving/receiving customs
In some cultures giving a gift is not only about the content, but also about symbols associated with the actual gift, often based on language. In China, for instance, one does not give somebody else a clock because the expression in Mandarin ‘send clock’ sounds like the expression for a funeral ritual. Avoid giving a gift in a set of four, because the word in Mandarin for the number 4 sounds like the word in Mandarin for death. The number 8 is a particularly lucky number. Also avoid giving sharp objects as a gift, such as scissors and knives. Colours are strong symbols in Chinese culture. When wrapping a gift, do not use black, blue or white paper (symbol of death). Rather use red (happiness) and gold (wealth, fortune). You give a gift with both hands (respect) and don’t open the gift in front of others. In Indonesia, giving a gift is a must as a sign of appreciation. Usually something which represents Indonesian culture is offered as a gift, but anything else will be fine as well. Indonesians, like all Muslim people, give a gift with their right hand. It is absolutely fine to open the gift while guests are present.

Customs & Belief Systems
Quite a few of our students are from countries where Islam is the main religion. There are, however, many different cultures represented in this group and one cannot, therefore, speak of one single Muslim culture. There are varying degrees of strictness of Islamic rules, i.e. the law in Northern African countries such as in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia is generally less stringent than, for instance, in Iran and Saudi Arabia (e.g. in Saudi Arabia females need to be accompanied by a male when visiting somebody else). Many of our Muslim students also come from Indonesia and Malaysia.
When inviting a Muslim student at home or for a meal outside your home, there are a few restrictions and rules to take into consideration and to respect:

- Alcohol may not be consumed
- Pork and meat from carnivorous animals are not allowed
- Other meats need to clearly be labelled ‘halal’ (meaning meat prepared as prescribed by Muslim law)
- Blood by-products are not allowed
- ‘Halal’ not only refers to meat, but also to other foods, such as bread and baked goods. These may not contain any dairy products.
- Fish and seafood are generally allowed

There are several Halal butchers, bakeries and restaurants in Adelaide offering halal meat and food. Ask your student to help you identify a good food outlet and he/she will be grateful to have input on this important aspect of their culture.

In some countries, Muslim people will not touch dogs (e.g. in Malaysia). Most Indonesians are afraid of dogs.

Muslim people use their right hand for everything, and in particular when eating. During the month of ‘Ramadan’ Muslim students will fast during daytime (in 2017, Ramadan will start on Saturday, 27 May and will continue until Saturday, 24 June 2017).