Cultural Diversity and Special Circumstances

The University celebrates its cultural diversity. Supervisors are not expected to be experts in the many cultures and communities present at the University of Adelaide but they are expected to be aware that there are differences and to communicate respectfully with all members of the University community.

Supervisors dealing with complaints may wish to consider the following:

- people from some cultures are reticent about making a complaint. This may be because complaints are not a preferred or culturally appropriate way of resolving a problem, because they fear doing so will brand them a trouble maker or because they feel their supervisor will not deal with the issue tactfully.
- there may be a different emphasis on priorities - in many Western cultures people will say the most important thing first in a conversation but for others it will be said last.
- staff, particularly at lower levels, may be anxious to please, not be seen to cause conflict and not expand on an issue without invitation.

Supervisory staff need to be aware of these dynamics and not assume all is well because there are no complaints.

Supervisory staff can assist in breaking down some of the barriers by:

- ensuring staff are aware of options for raising concerns;
- being creative with ways of dealing with an issue without it being a complaint;
- ensuring staff understand the University and the local area values complaints as a means of continuous improvement;
- assuring staff that there will not be any victimisation or other recriminations for making a complaint, and that it will not affect their career prospects within the University or through references;
- inviting the parties to a complaint to have a support person with them;
- allowing staff to express a preference about the gender of the person to whom they wish to speak or to request that a senior person of their race or religion be present or be consulted in processes of resolution.

Disabilities

There is a long history of exclusion and discrimination against people with a disability and in Australia there is a relatively recent social revolution around the rights of employees with a disability. Supervisors should be aware that staff with a disability may have faced discrimination in all areas of their lives and an issue at University may be difficult for them to separate from their experiences elsewhere. It may be useful to clearly separate the issues raised and re-establish the context for resolving the complaint. Supervisors can assist in breaking down some of the barriers:

- never assuming they know either what a staff member with a disability can do, will want or what is best for them.
- inviting staff to have a support person with them;
- checking any access or comfort issues;
- checking the length of meeting that the staff member feels comfortable with;
- remembering that the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) also prohibits discrimination against those associated with a person with a disability.

**Gender**

Depending on the culture and community that staff members are from, men and women often have very different roles in bringing forward a complaint.

Men and women may describe an issue very differently, express their emotions differently, and value personal interactions differently. It is not always an indication of the depth of feeling or the importance a particular issue has to the individual. There may also be a different impact on continued productivity between men and women, for example if the staff member no longer feels comfortable in an environment.

There is much evidence that women do not progress at the same rates in their careers in universities in Australia and this may influence appropriate styles of resolution of complaints. Both female and male supervisors need to be aware of the impact of their attitude to women, their style of communication and the impact of their role modelling.

**Indigenous Australian Staff**

Indigenous staff are in a significant minority in the University of Adelaide and that may influence their comfort in raising issues and complaints. Supervisors should be aware of this and where they need assistance, should feel free to seek it from the Director of the Centre for Australian Research and Studies.

**Religious Beliefs**

Supervisors are advised to make themselves aware of particular religious and cultural festivals relevant to the staff in their area and to encourage a team appreciation of these. This may impact on issues of:

- work allocation;
- timing of meetings;
- manner of resolutions agreed to.

In some instances, where, for example, the religion of a staff member is directly related to the content of the complaint, it may be appropriate for the Supervisor to acknowledge elders or leaders of a religious community when resolving a conflict or to organise a forum where members of an academic unit and members of the religious community can reach a resolution on an issue of concern.

**Sexuality**

Managers/Supervisors should not assume anyone's sexuality and should use inclusive language such as partner as opposed to husband/wife/boyfriend/girlfriend. Staff may not wish to disclose their sexuality outside of its relevance to a complaint and confidentiality should be respected.