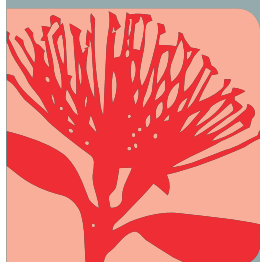


# Southern Regional Hub-funded project

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR TEACHING STAFF



## Supporting healthy student cohort formation

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Download all five project resources free from: <https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/assisting-the-formation-of-inclusive-engineering-cohorts/>

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# Supporting healthy student cohort formation

A resource guide for teaching staff

## Introduction

A cohort is a (year) group of students who take most or all their course work together over the course of their studies. It is a common way of grouping students, in the University system, in subject areas that have a prescribed curriculum, e.g. engineering, education, nursing, and law. Most teaching staff observe that each cohort of students has a distinct “personality”. To ensure that the cohort develops a healthy personality, one that is supportive, constructive and inclusive to all, teaching staff have a critical role to play.

Promoting a healthy cohort at the classroom level is rooted in three principles:

1. Diversity is an asset.
2. Inclusivity promotes the expression of diversity.
3. Inclusivity promotes feelings of belonging.

As teachers, we have a role model function to promote and guard these principles in the classroom. This is expressed in the way we construct the academic and social learning environments, our teaching practices and behaviours, before, during and after class, the expectations we express to students, and the curriculum choices we make.

## Academic and Social Learning Environments

Within the academic and social learning environments, building a cohort centres around three levels of relationships

- Student–student horizontal integration within the cohort (i.e. students in the same year).
- Student–student vertical integration (i.e. students of different years).
- Staff–student relations, with teaching, technical and administrative staff.

All these integrations can be done in the same programme, or across programmes, depending on the desired outcomes. There should also be thought to how a student’s whānau can be included in the program (Tomoana, 2012).

## Promoting student–student horizontal integration within cohort

Providing opportunities for students in the cohort to get to know each other is critical. This can be done for example through

- Explicit promotion of forming study groups with peers, discussing and promoting good study habits.
- In-class discussions or problem solving. As part of the discussion, students should introduce themselves to one another.
- Explicit teaching of how to collaborate in a team and how to be a productive team member. Group work is a learned skill.
- Low-stakes group work, with regular rearranging of groups. This may include laboratory group work.

## Promoting student–student horizontal integration across cohorts

- Group work and mixing up the cohorts where possible. Asking groups to make a (skills) needs assessment for a project for all phases of the project (e.g. engineering, diversity and transferrable skills).
- Inter-department / discipline collaborative projects, e.g. arranged around “big ideas” projects, ideas that are too big or too wicked to be dealt with within a single discipline.

## Promoting student–student vertical integration

- Tuakana – Teina model where students from higher years mentor and / or tutor students from lower years (Sciascia, 2017).
- Cross-year projects, where each year has different criteria that they are assessed on, with e.g. mentoring / leading a higher-year assessment, and the lower-year assessment focused on e.g. the engineering.

## Promoting staff–student relationships

- Explain how to connect with teaching and support staff, and that student communication is welcome (Rastovac Akbarzadeh & Ko, 2017).
- Role modelling the behaviour we want to see. The standard we walk past is the standard we accept. Combating micro-aggressions, and expecting tutors / demonstrators to do the same.
- Combat the hard-nosed, blunt, tough-guy image. Reinforce by inviting a diverse range of visiting (guest) speakers from industry to talk about work experiences in engineering and their technical expertise, as well as guests to talk about expected practices and behaviours in the work force (Tomoana, 2012) (Spencer, Logel, & Davies, 2016).
- Modelling advantages / strengths of inclusivity on professional workplace climate as well as better solutions to projects.
- If you are a teacher from an under-represented group, you will, almost by definition, have a role-model function thrust upon you, whether you want it or not. Students who are also part of that under-represented group will see themselves in you.
- Not reinforcing the different sub-cohort cliques (e.g. “we’re X engineers, and better than Y engineers”).

## Teaching practices

- Communication of expectations of performance and behaviour.
- Use of inclusive language and body language, including avoiding phrases such as e.g. “everyone knows”, “very simple equation”.
- Create a sense of belonging, e.g. by knowing preferred names of students.
- Opportunities for, and management of peer learning.
- Beware of assumptions of shared culture, e.g. the use of analogies and slang can work really well, but assume that everyone is ‘in the know’.
- Beware of assumptions on prior learning, experience, home resources and hobbies / interests, e.g. assuming hobby experience in the area, computer at home etc.
- Monitor who speaks in class and who is called on.

- Provide a variety of communication modes in addition to in class, such as discussion forums, so those who won't speak up in class have a forum (Tomoana, 2012).
- Management of student behaviour and actively combat non-inclusive behaviour. Oftentimes, an educational approach ("are you aware that what you said / did can be interpreted as XYZ") works better than a punitive approach.
- Incorporate Te Reo Māori and tikanga Māori into everyday teaching and learning, eg. greeting with "kia ora" or "tēnā koutou", farewell with "ka kite", well-being check with "kei te pēhea koutou?" (how are you all?), share kai (food), use mihi (introductions) and end courses with poroporoaki (opportunity to farewell) (Hall & Jerram).
- Create extra study groups to allow students to explore the material, concepts and ideas (Tomoana, 2012).

## Curriculum choices

The way the curriculum is constructed says a lot about the values we hold. Questions to ask yourself:

- Who is portrayed in the curriculum and examples: whose voices do you hear, and which ones don't you hear? Most curricula and text books have a strongly Western, European focus.
- Can students see themselves represented in the curriculum?

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