Guidelines for cultural exchanges with Indonesia

Cultural exchanges, both for students travelling to Indonesia and for those hosting students from Indonesia, can provide a rich, cultural experience. Participating students not only gain an increased knowledge, understanding and appreciation of another culture and lifestyle, they also gain an understanding of and appreciation for diversity. The most effective cultural exchanges are those in which students build personal relationships, often making life-long friends. Cultural exchanges also add a global perspective to the classroom curriculum.

Cultural exchanges can sometimes create cultural dilemmas for participating students, who may find themselves in new and confusing situations. This document has been developed to support participants and their families in developing an understanding of lifestyles and customs in Indonesia. Whether you are travelling to Indonesia or hosting a student from Indonesia, this information may help you gain the maximum benefit from the experience. The information provided is not exhaustive, and is intended as a guide only.

Greetings

Indonesian people do not usually show their feelings in public, and hugging or kissing someone in public is considered impolite. Greetings can be rather formal, as they are meant signify respect. A gentle handshake is the most common greeting, accompanied by the words selamat pagi (good morning), selamat siang (good afternoon) or selamat sore (good evening). Many Indonesians may give a slight bow or place their hands on their heart after shaking hands. If you are being introduced to several people, you should always start with the eldest or most senior person first. Titles are important in Indonesia, as they signify status. If you know of any titles a person may have, you should ensure you use them in conjunction with the name.

Names

Many Indonesians only have one name, although it is becoming more common to adopt a second name, especially among business people or the middle class, who find it easier to operate internationally with two names. The ‘main’ name may be either the first or the second - there is no consistency because of the great variety of traditions - so it is important to try to find out which name to use with Mr (Pak) or Ms (Bu). For example, Susan Smith may be addressed as either Bu Susan or Bu Smith, depending on the context.

If you are unsure what to call a person, simply use Bapak for men or Ibu for women, without a name. Bapak (which also means ‘father’) and Ibu (which also means ‘mother’) are used as terms of address for adults of a mature age and status. This is irrespective of whether they are married or have children.

In keeping with their own customs, Indonesians tend to address foreign visitors by a
single name, together with a respectful title, so you may find yourself called ‘Miss Veronica’ or ‘Mr Mal’, for example, even when being paged in hotels or airports. Although some Indonesians adopt a family name, most do not and it is usually not possible to identify members of the same family by a surname. When addressing others, Indonesians use a title (*Bapak/Ibu*), rather than one of the words for ‘you’ (*saudara, kamou or engkau*), which is seen as being quite blunt and impolite.

**Interactions (including non-verbal language)**

Indonesian people tend to want to maintain peace. They do this by not showing their emotions so that they avoid embarrassing others. There are many words in Indonesian which are literally translated as ‘yes’, but which really mean ‘no’. As Indonesian culture requires a polite, agreeable response, and saying ‘no’ to someone is considered to be impolite, you shouldn’t assume that a positive response necessarily means you have agreement. For example, if you invite someone to your house, the response may be “Okay, sometime in the future” which really means no. Looking someone straight in the eyes is considered to be staring. Indonesians therefore usually avoid prolonged eye contact, which could be viewed as a challenge and may cause anger.

**Housing**

Most Indonesians take their shoes off before entering a house. Going barefoot on cool floor tiles is far more comfortable in a tropical climate than covering your feet with shoes and socks. Shoes that have been worn outside are also considered dirty, so should be removed and left at the front door.

At home most families prefer to sit on mats on the floor. That is how they relax, watch TV, chat with friends, eat and drink and sometimes even sleep. However, when you are invited to someone's house, you are likely to be received in the sitting room, where you formally sit on chairs (but with bare feet). The soles of the feet are considered ‘unclean’, even though you might be wearing socks, so you should be careful when sitting cross-legged that you do not show the bare soles of your feet to your host or friends. Sitting on the floor with your legs stretched out before you is also considered to be very impolite.

**Eating and drinking**

In some parts of Indonesia, for example North Sumatra, it is not considered impolite to burp, and can even be regarded as a sign of appreciation of a good meal! Indonesians generally do not excuse themselves after burping.

In Indonesia, people commonly eat with a spoon and fork. The spoon is held in your right hand and the fork in your left hand. The fork is only used to put food on the spoon, and then only the spoon goes into your mouth. Knives are not used at the table, as the food is already cut into bite-sized pieces. Sometimes Indonesians eat with their hands, however it is very important that you
only use your right hand, as the left hand is used to clean yourself after going to the toilet. The basic technique when eating is to gather a small amount of rice with the top part of your fingers, which can then be dipped into other dishes and pushed into your mouth with your thumb. In some restaurants, utensils are provided. In this case, it would be considered rude to use your hands – you would be expected to use the utensils.

Eating while walking is inappropriate in Indonesia.

### Clothing

When visiting Indonesia, it is advisable to adopt a conservative and modest dress sense, especially for women. Skirt hemlines should fall below the knee and shoulders should always be covered. Men should try to avoid wearing shorts, but generally, if on holiday, casual clothes such as open-necked shirts and trousers for men and modest t-shirts, skirts and dresses for women are perfectly acceptable.

When visiting a place of worship such as a mosque or a temple, the proper dress etiquette is of utmost importance. When entering a mosque, you should always remove your shoes. Women should cover their heads with a scarf – some mosques may provide these beforehand, but it is best to always come prepared. Likewise, wearing a sarong and selendang (a sash tied around your waist) and removing your shoes are also expected when visiting Hindu temples. Put the shoes down with the toe pointing to the outside from inside the entrance or lobby area.

### Families

Family structures vary greatly in different parts of Indonesia, however in general, the family is very important and it is very common for extended families, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, to all live together in one place. Although this is true both in the cities and in the rural areas of Indonesia, it is becoming less common in city life.

Generally speaking, most Indonesian families are closely knit and work hard to help each other. People have a responsibility to their families and especially to their elders. Indonesians are expected to respect the experience of their elders and follow their advice. They are also expected to look after their parents in old age.

Children learn from an early age how to help around the home. In rural areas they may work on farms when they are not at school. In the cities they may try to find a job, in order to contribute to the family income.

### Schooling

Class sizes in Indonesia are usually larger than in Australia. All Indonesian students wear a school uniform and many female Islamic students wear a headscarf (jilbab) as part of their uniform.

Schools in Indonesia are gradually becoming equipped with ICT facilities, such as computer rooms and internet access. Most classrooms are sparsely furnished, with rows of tables and chairs and a whiteboard.
Gift-giving

There are many times when it is considered customary to give a gift in Indonesia: to celebrate an occasion, when returning from a trip, when you are invited to an Indonesian home or to thank someone for providing you with a service. Gifts of food are often appreciated, but you should avoid bringing food gifts with you to a dinner party unless it has been agreed upon beforehand. A gift of food may imply that your host cannot provide enough. On the other hand, food can be sent as a thank-you gift after the event.

Unwrapping a gift in front of the giver is not part of Indonesian culture. This action implies that the recipient is childish and impatient. Moreover, if the gift turns out to be a poor choice, ‘loss of face’ will result. Instead, the recipient will say ‘thank you’ briefly, set the gift aside, and only open it after the giver’s departure. Remember that Indonesians tend not to express their feelings openly or in public. You will also be expected to follow this ritual when you receive a gift.

When visiting an area of Indonesia where a special delicacy is available, it is expected that you will bring samples back for your friends.

Religion

Religion plays an important role in daily life in Indonesia, and is always stated on ID cards and student cards. Although Indonesia has one of the world’s largest Muslim populations, a significant number of other religions is also represented, including Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The first of the five principles of the Pancasila, the official philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state, is belief in one God. Many Indonesians find it difficult to understand that religion is not always practised in the homes of Australian families.

Levels of formality

If you are a language student you may notice that young people use an informal level of language amongst themselves, whereas language used when talking to older people or teachers is more formal.

Manner and demeanour

Young Indonesian people may be less likely to express their opinions than their Western counterparts. They also have a different understanding of personal space, resulting in a different understanding of privacy from many Australian students. The concept of ownership is less defined and sharing is a common practice. This often means borrowing things without the need to ask permission beforehand or say thank you afterwards. Queuing is not considered essential and people may ‘push in’ if you stand back a little.

Time

The concept of time is more flexible in Indonesia than is usually the case in Australia. In Indonesia, the concept of jam karet (rubber time) is commonly accepted, especially at social functions. However, now that more and more Western practices...
are being adopted, punctuality is becoming more important, especially in a city like Jakarta. As a visitor to Indonesia, you will always be expected to be punctual. However, you should not be surprised if the person you are meeting arrives late.

**Transport**

There are many different forms of transport in Indonesia. Most taxis have meters, but always check they are being used. If not, you need to negotiate a price before starting the journey. Tickets for buses and trains are a set price, but many other forms of transport require negotiation of the price beforehand.

**Shopping and bargaining**

For many Indonesians, bargaining is a way of life and getting a fair or cheap price is regarded as a challenge. Supermarkets and department stores have set prices, but the majority of shopkeepers in smaller shops will expect you to bargain. Find out the asking price and then offer about one third of that price. The shopkeeper will then return with a new ‘best’ price. Continue bargaining until you agree on a reasonable price, usually somewhere between the initial asking price and your first offer. If you walk away, showing you are not really interested, the shopkeeper will then decide whether or not they actually want the sale, and may give you a better price. However, once a price is agreed upon, you are expected to purchase the item.

**Concept of ‘saving face’**

In Indonesian the concept of ‘saving face’ is very important. Direct confrontation, debate or argument should be avoided and embarrassment is often shown by smiling or laughing. Remember that Indonesians want to maintain harmony and peace.

**Writing system**

Indonesian is a phonetic language and is written using the Latin alphabet. Like English it is written from left to right, and read from top to bottom.