



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
FACULTY OF SCIENCE

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

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This guide is based on the Faculty of Educational Sciences publication
A Student's Guide to Equality and Diversity.

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1. SCIENCE, EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Equality and diversity are among the key principles guiding the operations of the Faculty of Science. The Faculty has a special societal responsibility since it trains teachers and other experts in professional life. A good life means a just society and a global community that operates with joint responsibility. Its building blocks are ethically sustainable operations, identification of power structures and hierarchies, participation, and appreciation of diversity among human beings. Scientists are always social and political agents. Everyone can either help or hinder the realisation of the preconditions for the good life through their own choices, both locally and globally. The aim is that all scientists nurture the preconditions of the good life, work for them and also react when these preconditions become endangered.

The implementation of equality and diversity in our times is not a given; for example, racism and other violations of human rights challenge equality and diversity among people every day. This is not something that happens somewhere else in the world but each of one us in our everyday lives comes face-to-face with structures, practices and modes of expression which question the validity of equality and diversity. As scientists and members of our community, we are all responsible for promoting equality and diversity by tackling structures and activities maintaining and producing inequality. This guide provides readers with basic information about equality and diversity as well as on how to recognise, prevent and address discrimination and inequality.

2. FINNISH LEGISLATION SAFEGUARDS EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Finnish legislation aims to promote equality and diversity while decreasing inequality and discriminatory structures in our society. Many laws have been passed with this aim and they also regulate the operations of the University.

2.1 LEGISLATION ON DISCRIMINATION

Finnish laws prohibit discrimination. The main laws on prohibition of discrimination are the Act on Equality between Women and Men and the Non-Discrimination Act. In addition to prohibiting discrimination, legislation obliges educational institutions and education providers to promote equality and diversity. The Faculty Science educates future teachers and other experts in professional life who have a legal obligation to promote equality in their future professions. The obligation to promote equality and diversity is stipulated in, for example, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the Basic Education Act as well as the legally binding national core curriculum for early childhood education and care and the national core curriculum for basic education related to the implementation of these acts.

FURTHER INFORMATION ON LEGISLATION AND CURRICULA IS AVAILABLE ONLINE:

- Legislation related to discrimination has been collated on the [Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's website on legislation](#)
- [Non-Discrimination Act on the Finlex website](#)
- [Act on Equality between Women and Men on the Finlex website](#)
- [Act on Early Childhood Education and Care on the Finlex website](#)
- [Basic Education Act on the Finlex website](#)
- [National core curriculum for early childhood education and care on the Finnish National Agency for Education website](#)
- [National core curriculum for basic education on the Finnish National Agency for Education website](#)

2.2 NON-DISCRIMINATION AND EQUALITY AS LEGAL CONCEPTS

Non-discrimination refers to the equality of individuals. In a just society, the personal characteristics of individuals should not affect their opportunities to, for example, access education, find employment or receive services. The Non-Discrimination Act obliges to equal treatment and states that no person may be discriminated against on the basis of age, origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, political activity, trade union activity, family relationships, state of health, disability, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics. These are considered bases of discrimination. **In legislation, equality** refers to equality between genders and the prevention of discrimination based on sexual identity or expression of gender.

FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE DEFINITIONS OF NON-DISCRIMINATION AND EQUALITY:

- [Non-Discrimination Ombudsman's website: What is equality?](#)
- [Koulu vailla vertaa! Opas Yhdenvertaisuussuunnitteluun](#) (pdf) (in Finnish only)

2.3 DEFINITION OF DISCRIMINATION

Typically, discrimination is the unequal treatment of individuals based on some real or assumed personal characteristic or because they belong to a certain group. The underlying factors behind discrimination are often prejudices which are generalised to apply to all individuals belonging to such a group. Discrimination may be **a single act, word or situation**, or it may be a consequence of **the structures, rules or common practices of society**. Discriminating behaviour may include using language that reinforces gender stereotypes or telling jokes at a lecture that reinforce prejudices.

General prohibitions of discrimination define and prohibit direct and indirect discrimination based on the above bases of discrimination. According to law, prohibited discrimination also includes sexual harassment and discrimination based on gender, as well as an order or instruction to discriminate. Discrimination may also occur based on an assumed characteristic of an individual or a factual or assumed characteristic of a person close to the individual. Consequently, discrimination may occur for example when an individual is discriminated against for being closely associated with someone belonging to a sexual or ethnic minority (discrimination by association). An act may be discrimination even when the perpetrator errs regarding, for example, the origin, age or sexual orientation of an individual. This is called discrimination based on assumption.

In educational institutions, those encountering discrimination most frequently are individuals and groups subjected to prejudice or stereotypes based on, for example, external characteristics, ethnic origin or sexual orientation. However, discrimination is also a structural phenomenon that cannot be removed by merely tackling individual cases of discrimination. What is key is changing the operating culture. **Equality and diversity can be genuinely promoted only through change originating in the educational community as a whole, in which everyone is asked to question their privilege and prejudices as well as to recognise the diversity within themselves and others.**

A high-angle photograph of a modern building interior. In the center, a wide wooden staircase with a light-colored wooden handrail leads upwards. To the left of the staircase, a group of five people are sitting on a long, low wooden ledge. From left to right: a man in a plaid shirt, a woman in a red top, a man in a white and green patterned jacket, and two other people whose faces are not clearly visible. They appear to be engaged in conversation. The floor is made of large, dark grey square tiles. In the background, there are some green plants and a blue sign that says "EXACTUM". The overall atmosphere is bright and modern.

FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE DEFINITION OF DISCRIMINATION AND NON-DISCRIMINATION

- Non-discrimination Ombudsman/Ministry of Justice: [Non-Discrimination Act brochure](#) (PDF)
- [Koulu vailla vertaa! Opas Yhdenvertaisuussuunnitteluun](#) (PDF) (in Finnish only)

3. SAFE STUDY ENVIRONMENT

Thriving communities promote encountering all individuals as they are and work to ensure that everyone has equal access to shared activities. However, exclusion occurs in everyday language use and interaction at the level of both language and action. All communities have norms related to behaviour and to the individual, to which everyone is assumed to conform. Difference is defined in relation to the norm determining normality. Therefore, it is important to consider which norms are detrimental to the realisation of diversity and equality.

Norms delineating an individual's right to self-determination may be detrimental and create situations where discrimination occurs. Treating others merely as representatives of a certain group does not produce equal interaction. **It is important that everyone can determine for themselves, for example, what name or designation is used to refer to them or whether, in a certain context, they want to be defined through their gender, family situation or disability.** For example, during student activities, it may happen that students with, say, families or physical disabilities are treated as differing from the norm of a student. However, it is important that no one is seen only as a representative of a given group in situations where membership in said group is irrelevant.

Also remarks meant as humour may be discriminatory and give rise to unequal situations between people. Discrimination cannot be justified by saying that a discriminatory expression was a joke. According to law, an act with no discriminatory motive can be discrimination. Joking may at its best spread joy and communality, but at its worst it may exclude some of the listeners from the group. It is important to recognise who is the object of laughter and whether their status is weaker than that of the others.

At the University both the staff and students have an obligation to treat others with respect. Everyone has the right to point out if they feel that someone's use of language offends them or others.

Norm criticism refers to the critical exploration of the norms that are prevalent in society, the identification of discriminatory structures and the aim of changing them. Recognising your own privilege and listening to people belonging to other groups also helps to identify any discriminating structures in which you yourself participate. **Norm critical consideration enables the deconstruction and renewal of the norms guiding your actions and the operating culture of the educational institution to make them more equal and diverse while providing safer spaces for everyone.**



3.1 NORMATIVE THINKING HINDERS INTERACTION

Deep-rooted ways of categorising participants according to certain norms may be manifested in the interaction between students and in teaching situations. Challenging and deconstructing these normative ways of speaking helps to construct a safer learning environment.

Normative categorising may have a detrimental effect on interaction in a study environment, for example, in the following ways:

- Even though more assumed females are taking part in activities than assumed males, the latter are given more opportunities to speak and are more actively seen.
- A lecturer calls assumed females ‘girls’ while addressing assumed males by name or without reference to their gender.
- We speak of contents in a stigmatising way and juxtapose ‘easy’ and ‘challenging’ contents, and take it for granted that everyone present shares these opinions of the contents.
- A student is asked about their parents’ country of origin and they are used as a representative of that group for education purposes.
- A teacher addresses a student by their official first name instead of a gender-neutral name they prefer to use.
- Girls and boys are considered, as a rule, to be different types of learners whose learning takes place through different methods. Learners are categorised either as girls or boys.
- Teaching and information material only includes pictures of one gender.
- The view that all people must be tolerated and understood is repeated.
- We use teaching material that only shows examples with stereotypically male interests.
- Immigrants are referred to in a way that does not define in more detail which group of people is being referred to. Finns and immigrants are spoken of as separate groups, membership of which is assumed to be mutually exclusive.
- The idea that Finns are Christians and Muslims are ‘others’ is reiterated.

See also the [Normit nurin - Älä Oleta! guide](#) (in Finnish only) produced by Seta and other associations on the Seta website.

3.2 PRIVILEGE BRINGS BENEFITS, DISCRIMINATION HINDERS

When you are not discriminated against based on some personal characteristic, you are privileged based on that particular characteristic. **Consequently, privilege means gaining some benefit based on belonging to a certain group in a certain context.** Characteristics defining these kinds of privileged groups may include gender, family type, age, skin colour, nationality, health, wealth or ability.

Privileges are often invisible to those benefiting from them in a certain context. Likewise discrimination is difficult to perceive if you yourself have not been discriminated against based on a personal characteristic. An individual who is privileged based on a personal characteristic may find it hard to perceive discrimination based on this characteristic. To put it differently, people have a tendency to identify and understand the type of discrimination they have personally experienced. It is a privilege to not see or experience discrimination. This kind of privilege carries with it an obligation to listen to and learn from experiences you have not had.

EXAMPLE 1

A police officer asks to see the ID of a student walking in a public place. The police officer justifies this by saying that the person's appearance, i.e., the colour of their skin, corresponds to a description of a person suspected of a crime. Once, a student on their way home from a students' night out did not have their ID with them and consequently had to spend several hours in police custody. It was only after their flatmate brought their ID to the police station that they were released. The student's white flatmate never carries ID with them, but the student's skin colour exposes them to ethnic profiling. As a result, they do not feel safe in public places without carrying ID, even though they are a Finnish citizen.

Likewise, family type may produce either benefit or discrimination based on whether the family represents that society's prevalent norm of family life. A family comprising two cisgendered parents and their biological children is the normative family type in our society. Cisgendered refers to individuals whose gender identity and expression accord with the gender determined for them at birth. This kind of family type may produce privilege in relation to other types of families, for example, one-parent families, rainbow families or adoptive families.

Privilege is a feature of a system, not of an individual. Privilege is created by an environment that favours certain characteristics and groups whose members share certain traits. A privileged individual benefits from the system favouring certain characteristics even if they do not seek out situations where they are placed in a privileged position.

EXAMPLE 2

Two students live equally far away from the University. One of them always takes public transport to the University and already starts studying during the commute. The other one prefers cycling regardless of the weather because they keep encountering racist comments and threatening behaviour on public transport.

Privilege means that an individual's position is more difficult than another individual's in the same situation because they do not possess the same privilege as the other individual. However, privilege does not mean that the life of an individual who is privileged because of a personal characteristic is always easy or that they will not encounter difficulties or discrimination based on some other characteristic of theirs.

Discrimination may also occur based on several real or assumed characteristics simultaneously. This is called multiple discrimination.



EXAMPLE 3

It is difficult for a visually impaired Finnish-speaking white individual to move around in public places if accessibility has not been taken into account in them. In addition to limitations due to visual impairment, a visually impaired, dark-skinned individual of African origin encounters racism in Finland.

In other words, discrimination and privilege are not mutually exclusive phenomena. People have many characteristics which may be either beneficial or detrimental to them in certain social situations. **To sum up, a privileged position means that an individual is not considered weaker, worse or less valuable than another due to a particular characteristic.** In the same way that a person may experience discrimination based on a personal characteristic of a person close to them, the privileged position of a person close to them may safeguard that person from discrimination. An individual belonging to a gender minority may be subjected to open discrimination when on their own while being safe from harassment most of the time when in the company of someone belonging to the gender majority.

3.3 SAFER SPACE PRINCIPLES

A feeling of security is a precondition for inclusion, learning, development and creativity. Our aim is to ensure that everyone admitted to the Faculty feels safe and accepted as they are. For example, the following principles for a safer space may help us notice how the Faculty can be turned into an even safer space.

The principles for a safer space can be applied when appropriate in all meetings, events and learning situations. It is good to agree on the principles and review them before, for example, the start of an event or course. If it is decided that the principles will be applied, it is important that all participants commit to these principles. It is also good to keep the principles on hand and available for viewing whenever they are to be applied. The principles for a safer space can also be used in thinking about how to encounter others in a variety of situations.

We can create a safer space together by applying, for example, some of the following principles:

1. We ensure that the Faculty facilities and online environments are as accessible and non-discriminatory as possible.
2. We aim to use clear language which does not exclude anyone.
3. We do not use discriminatory or othering expressions.
4. We respect the human dignity of all members of the Faculty community. We take into account various beliefs, psychological, neurological, linguistic and physical abilities, differences in wealth, age, family types, and other personal characteristics.
5. We aim to be aware of our prejudices. We do not define experiences or characteristics, such as gender, nationality, sexual orientation, class status, health status, ability, native language or other personal characteristics on behalf of anyone we encounter.
6. We encounter people as they want to be encountered, not as members of their presumed group.
7. We give everyone room to define their own boundaries both in terms of self-expression and physically. For example, no one needs to reveal personal things about themselves or be touched without their consent.
8. When needed, activities will be adapted so that everyone can participate.
9. We do not harass anyone through words, touching or looking.
10. We are aware of how the use of intoxicants may affect our and others' behaviour.
11. We give space to all experiences and do not disparage others' displays of emotion.
12. When we make mistakes, we turn the gaze towards ourselves and rectify our behaviour.
13. We give others the opportunity to become aware of their actions and rectify their behaviour.
14. We take responsibility for challenging situations and resolve them together.
15. We encourage participants to consider how this social situation could be turned into a safer space for all concerned.

These instructions for creating a safer space are based on many definitions of a safer space. Read more in the Sources and reading material section.

4. WHAT TO DO IF DISCRIMINATION OR HARASSMENT OCCURS

In addition to national legislation, the University of Helsinki, the Faculty of Science and all members of the University community are bound by the University's internal guidelines, principles and plans.

The students of the University of Helsinki are entitled to an intellectually stimulating learning environment, which is physically and mentally safe. Every University unit must ensure that students are not subjected to harassment or inappropriate treatment in study or supervision contexts.

4.1 OBLIGATION TO TAKE ACTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

The Faculty of Science of the University of Helsinki does not accept inappropriate behaviour, bullying or harassment. Every University employee, teacher and supervisor is obliged to address any harassment they observe taking place in their work or study community.

The Equality and Diversity Plan of the University of Helsinki as well as further information on the University's principles, guidelines and measures can be found on the University's Flamma pages on equality, diversity and accessibility: [Equality, diversity and accessibility](#).

The [instructions for the prevention of inappropriate treatment and harassment](#) (PDF) published on the University of Helsinki website are intended as a guideline for members of the University's work or study community who have been subjected to inappropriate behaviour or harassment at work or during their studies.

Sexual harassment is also prohibited by the Act on Equality between Women and Men. The Finnish National Agency for Education has published a guide on preventing and intervening in harassment: [Prevention of and intervention in sexual harassment at schools and educational institutions](#) (PDF).

4.2 AN ACUTE DISCRIMINATION OR HARASSMENT SITUATION

Since discrimination and harassment are activities demeaning of human dignity, experiencing or witnessing them can be a difficult experience. Discrimination and harassment may have sudden or long-term detrimental effects on the parties' lives and their ability to act. If it is impossible to act in a way that protects oneself or another person in a harassment or discrimination situation, it is also possible to seek help after the event.

When a student tells a member of the University staff about a situation where discrimination or harassment has occurred, the staff member is obliged to take action to rectify the situation regardless of whether the individual charged with inappropriate behaviour is a member of staff or not. However, it is up to you to decide to whom you want personal matters or events to be disclosed further.

If, as a student, you have witnessed a situation where discrimination has occurred, you may, with the permission of the individual subjected to the discrimination or harassment, inform a member of the Faculty's or discipline's staff. You may also enquire how addressing the matter is proceeding.

Remember that handling discrimination or harassment cases on behalf of someone else is stressful in itself. If you require help or support, you can get it from the same parties who are providing such help or support to the individual who was subjected to the inappropriate behaviour. Do not think that you have to deal with what you have heard or experienced alone.

4.3 HANDLING DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT CASES

According to the University of Helsinki guidelines, as a rule, cases of discrimination or harassment should be handled within the study or work community. If possible, it is recommended that you get in touch with the staff of your study track or the Faculty. **If the individual guilty of harassment is a member of staff, you can report it to any member of staff. They are obliged to take the necessary action to address the situation.** Harassment or discrimination meeting the definition of a criminal offence must be reported to the police. You can find contact information for various parties providing help and support in handling discrimination and harassment cases below.

A student at the Faculty of Science can contact the Kumpula well-being team through bit.ly/Kumpula-support-staff.

If you have encountered harassment or other inappropriate behaviour at the University, you can also contact the University's harassment liaisons: Timo Valtonen, timo.valtonen@helsinki.fi and Terhi Somerkallio, terhi.somerkallio@helsinki.fi. Harassment liaisons help to address the issue, refer on and, when necessary, clarify what further action needs to be taken.

The Student Union of the University of Helsinki also has harassment liaisons, who advise and support students who have encountered harassment, bullying, discrimination or other inappropriate behaviour. You may contact them even if you yourself have not been subjected to harassment but have witnessed harassment or wish to discuss possible ways of intervening in it. Even a wish to discuss your experiences is a good enough reason to get in touch! When needed, a harassment liaison will direct you to additional sources of assistance. You can contact the harassment liaisons by email at hairintayhdyshenkilo@hyy.fi.

Individuals encountering obstacles due to their disability may be entitled to appropriate adjustments. Refusing to make appropriate adjustments may also be an instance of discrimination. In issues related to adjustments and special arrangements for accessibility, please contact specialneeds@helsinki.fi.

If it is suspected that harassment or discrimination meets the definition of a criminal offence, the matter must be reported to the police without delay by calling the emergency number 112. [Victim Support Finland](#) also provides assistance to victims of crime or suspected crime (phone 116006). You can also ask for support and advice anonymously via the chat service on their website.

If you suspect discrimination, you can also ask for advice from the [Office of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman](#) (email yvv@oikeus.fi or phone 0295666817, Tue–Thu 10–12) and in issues related to gender and equality from the [Office of the Ombudsman for Equality](#) (email tasa-arvo@oikeus.fi or phone 0295666842, Mon–Tue 9-11, Wed–Thu 13–15). Individuals belonging to a trade union may also turn to their trade union for legal advice on suspected cases of discrimination.

Harassment and discrimination may have a serious impact on health. In acute symptoms, you should contact healthcare services without delay, either the Finnish [Student Health Service \(FSHS\)](#) or if you are employed by the University, occupational healthcare, more information on which is available on the Flamma page on [Occupational healthcare](#). If you notice that a victim of discrimination or harassment is not coping well, please direct them to sources of help.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Glossaries:

- [SETA's website: Sateenkaarisanasto](#) (in Finnish only)
- [ESOK.fi website: Käsitteet ja sanasto](#) (in Finnish only)
- [FEM-R website: Sanasto](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Mielenterveystalo.fi website: Sanasto](#) (in Finnish and Swedish only)
- [Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare website: Tasa-arvosanasto](#) (in Finnish and Swedish only)
- [Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare website: Migration and cultural diversity – concepts](#)
- [Finnish Refugee Council website: Sanasto](#) (in Finnish only)

Equality and diversity publications:

- [Koulu vailla vertaa! Opas yhdenvertaisuussuunnitteluun](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Normit nurin - Älä Oleta! guide](#) (in Finnish only) produced by Seta and other associations.
- [Non-Discrimination Ombudsman: Non-Discrimination Act brochure](#)
- [Ministry of Social Affairs and Health publication: Tietopaketti sukupuolen moninaisuuden huomioimisesta oppilaitoksille, työpaikoille ja viranomaisille](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Opas opettajille. Seksuaalisen suuntautumisen ja sukupuolen moninaisuus – Opitaan yhdessä!](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Finnish National Agency for Education website: Tasa-arvo ja yhdenvertaisuus](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Mukana! Tasa-arvo- ja yhdenvertaisuustyö toisella asteella](#) (in Finnish only) on the Finnish National Agency for Education website

Sources on principles for a safer space:

- [HYY:n turvallisemman tilan ohjeet](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Guidance Corner principles for a safer space](#)
- [UN Youth of Helsinki principles for a safer space](#)
- [Brown Girls: Turvallisempien tilojen periaatteet](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Brown Girls/Jasmina Amzil: Turvallisten tilojen pitkä historia](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Utopia Helsinki: Turvallisemmat tilat](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Pink&Black Helsinki: Safer space policy](#)
- [Coalition for Safer Spaces: what are, and why support, 'safer' spaces](#)
- [Miehet ry: Turvallisemman tilan periaatteet](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Green Women: Turvallisemman tilan säännöt](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Federation of Green Youth and Students: Turvallisempi tila](#) (in Finnish only)
- [Peace Education Institute: Neljä vinkkiä turvallisempaan tilaan](#) (in Finnish only)
- [StopHatredNow: Ethical guidelines](#)
- [UrbanApa: Ethical guidelines](#)



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