

MODULE 1: WHY IS HUMAN DIGNITY IMPORTANT?

In this module, we will be working towards the achievement of learning outcome 2: work collaboratively to explain the concept of the dignity of the human person and analyse examples of a commitment to human dignity in action.

We will also be working towards the attainment of graduate attributes:

1: demonstrate respect for the dignity of each individual and for human diversity (which we will do through the *content* of the module); and

4: think critically and reflectively (which you will do through the *skills processes* involved in completing the activities).

INTRODUCING THE GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES IN UNCC300

Throughout this unit, extensive material is provided to support your development of the graduate attributes at third-year level. When you see a symbol such as the one below, you will find a direct link to these materials from the module in which you are working, although you can also access them from the home page.



In this unit, this is the symbol for materials relating to graduate attribute 4: think critically and reflectively.

Please note that the graduate attributes will be tested in your assessment tasks or through self-reflection on your classroom activities. You will see how important the graduate attributes are when you read through the assessment criteria.

Go to the [UNCC300 Foundational Graduate Attribute Resource](#) now. Compare it with the [UNCC100 Foundational Graduate Attribute Resource](#). UNCC300 addresses some of the same Graduate Attributes as UNCC100, but note particularly the increased level of skill demanded at third year. You will also see that UNCC300 focuses on some different Graduate Attributes.

Measure yourself against the different sets of skills by using this tool, [?](#), on the homepage in Module 1, so that you can actively work on developing them during the course of this unit.

1.1 WHAT IS DIGNITY?

“dignity: the quality of being worthy or honourable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence. Latin *dignitāt-em* merit, worth”

*Oxford English Dictionary*¹



Photo of **Rosa Parks** riding a Montgomery bus immediately following the decision to desegregate buses
Source: http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/083_afr.html#ParksR, Public Domain

In UNCC100, we focused on the theme of the common good: how we think about what is needed in order for all people to flourish in society. With UNCC300, we are going to shift the focus from the social to the individual, although of course, we can never think about the individual without reference to the broader context of society. In this unit, we are going to consider what it means to be a human being, and more particularly, how we can understand the notion of human worth, or value. This is what we are referring to when we talk about *human dignity*.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Complete some research on Rosa Parks (pictured above). Remember from UNCC100 that Wikipedia is not considered a reliable scholarly resource.

1. Who was she?
2. What impact did Rosa Parks have on the US Civil Rights movement?
3. What impact do you think Rosa Parks has had on our understanding of human dignity today?
4. There have been numerous songs written about Rosa Parks. The Neville Brothers recorded “[Sister Rosa](#)” in 1989. Click the link to hear the song, and follow the [lyrics](#) here.

Human dignity is probably a very familiar expression, because the concept is part of many conversations taking place in the contemporary world. At the same time, once we begin to think about it, we find that the *basis* of human dignity can be understood in a number of different ways.

As David McCabe points out:

Most discussions of important moral and political issues, along with our everyday reflections on how others should be treated, occur against a background assumption of human dignity—for example, the idea that human beings have special standing shared by no other creatures on earth. In countless contexts—talking about what we must provide to all persons (health care?), what we must never do to anyone (torture?), how to handle end-of-life scenarios (assisted suicide?), what persons should be free to do (gay marriage?), and so on—we can't get very far without running up against some claim about the dignity that each person possesses. Getting clear on what that notion involves, and what such claims are grounded on, is thus a hugely important task.²

Much of our study in UNCC300 will be focused on coming to an understanding of different approaches to providing a basis for human dignity, and how the idea of human dignity can be applied to various contemporary issues.



A hand-drawn graphic featuring the words 'human', 'RESPECT', 'DIGNITY', 'worth', and 'HUMANdignity'. The word 'human' is written in green at the top. Below it, 'RESPECT' is written in orange, followed by 'DIGNITY' in a larger orange font. Underneath 'DIGNITY', the word 'worth' is written in orange. At the bottom, 'HUMANdignity' is written in green, with 'HUMAN' in all caps and 'dignity' in lowercase.

¹ [Oxford English Dictionary Online](#), s.v. “dignity,” accessed December 8, 2012.

² David McCabe, review of “[Human Dignity](#),” by George Kateb, *Commonweal*, June 17, 2011, 29.

1.2 HOW HAS THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN DIGNITY SHAPED OUR SOCIETY?

1.2.1 World War II as a catalyst for thinking about human dignity

The idea of human dignity has a special significance in the contemporary world. It became particularly prominent in the latter half of the twentieth century, in response to the horrors of the Second World War. Both sides in this conflict committed atrocities against civilian populations that shocked many and caused deep questioning about the value of human life.

Most famously, the world reacted with horror and disbelief when the genocide of Jews, [gypsies](#), [\[transcript\]](#) the disabled and other groups—like homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and socialists—in the [concentration camps](#) of [the Holocaust](#) [\[transcript\]](#) was uncovered. Follow the links to learn more.



Deportation of Jews from Russia, unknown photographer, 1941, Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-F016206-0003
Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Bundesarchiv_B_145_Bild-F016206-0003%2C_Russland%2C_Deportation_von_Juden.jpg / CC-BY-SA

However, the allied forces also undertook actions that raised serious questions around the value and sanctity of human life. This brief documentary on the [bombing of Dresden](#) [\[transcript\]](#) raises some difficult questions about the legacy of this terrible event for modern warfare tactics.

Similarly, the use of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused heated debate. This [dramatic documentary](#) [\[transcript\]](#) uses a combination of original footage and reconstruction to tell the story in Hiroshima and explore the aftermath. This [interview with a crew member](#) [\[transcript\]](#) of the Enola Gay aircraft which dropped the bomb gives some insight into how the US military justified its actions.

ACTIVITY 1.2.1 – TO DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING

After engaging with the material above, respond to the following questions.

1. What strikes you about the range of issues highlighted here?
2. What do you notice about the nature and capacity of humankind?
3. How has the value of human life been highlighted by such atrocities?

1.2.2 IMPORTANT DOCUMENTARY RESPONSES

One response to the horrors of WWII was the [United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#) adopted in 1948

The preamble to this landmark document opens with the statement: “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

Article 1 of the UDHR proclaims: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

This [article](#) marking the 50th anniversary of the Declaration gives some background to the impetus for its writing and the drafting process. The United Nations [Dag Hammarskjöld Library](#) site provides access to original documents from meetings of the drafting committee and further information on the process of producing the UDHR.

Since the UDHR, the notion of human dignity has been included in many other key documents such as the 1966 [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) and [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), both of which recognise that certain rights “derive from the inherent dignity of the human person.”

The European Union adopted a [Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) in 2000. [Article 1](#) declares: “Human Dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected.” Some individual nations also appeal to human dignity in their constitutions. Section 10 of the [South African Constitution](#) states: “Everyone has dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected.”



In the following activity, you are asked to browse through sources to look for particular features. You need to locate and analyse information. Don't forget, you also need to be doing some critical thinking here, too.

ACTIVITY 1.2.2 – TO DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Browse the various sites linked above and consider the following questions:

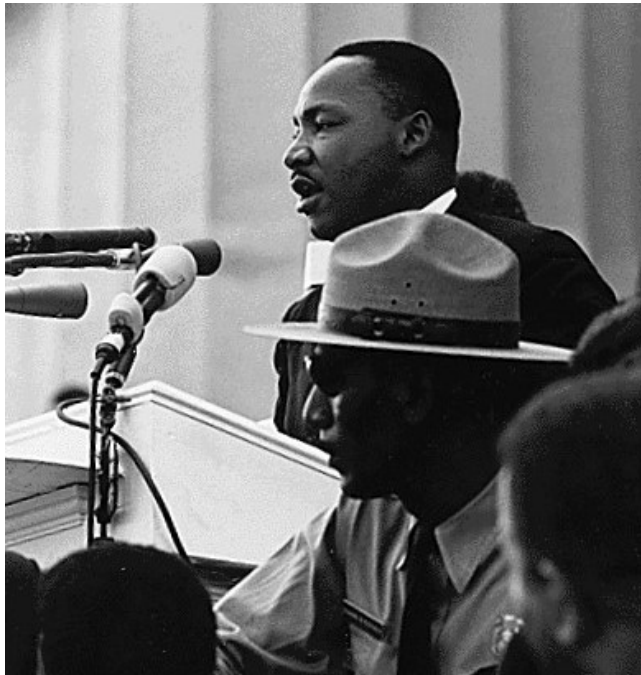
1. What values are implicit and explicit in the documents?
2. What role did such documents play in the development of our understanding of human dignity?
3. What impact do you think these documents have on our thinking about human dignity today?

1.2.3 CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

The concept of human dignity has also been at the heart of civil rights movements.

... in the United States

Martin Luther King appealed to the dignity of all human beings in his very famous “[I have a Dream](#)” speech. (A full [transcript](#) of this famous speech is available on the US Constitution website.)



Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jnr. delivers his speech during the March on Washington, unknown photographer, 1963, Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/81/Martin_Luther_King_-_March_on_Washington.jpg Public Domain.

... in South Africa

The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa is another example of the growing recognition of human dignity. Watch this short documentary on the life of [Nelson Mandela \[transcript\]](#) who became the figurehead and spokesperson for this movement. In his [statement from the dock](#) at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial, Mandela said:

The lack of human dignity experienced by Africans is the direct result of the policy of white supremacy. White supremacy implies black inferiority. Legislation designed to preserve white supremacy entrenches this notion. Menial tasks in South Africa are invariably performed by Africans. When anything has to be carried or cleaned the white man will look around for an African to do it for him, whether the African is employed by him or not. Because of this sort of attitude, whites tend to regard Africans as a separate breed. They do not look upon them as people with families of their own; they do not realise that they have emotions - that they fall in love like white people do; that they want to be with their wives and children like white people want to be with theirs; that they want to earn money, enough money to support their families properly, to feed and clothe them and send them to school.³



White House Press Office, *Nelson Mandela*, 1993,
Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nelson_Mandela.jpg
Public Domain.

... in Australia

In our own country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have long struggled to have their dignity and rights recognised. It seems extraordinary that up until 1967, they were not counted in the census and were not considered as citizens of Australia.

The 1967 Referendum is seen by many Australians as the foundation for the movement for recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution. View this [clip](#) [or read the transcript] from the ABC 7.30 program which gives a good history of the 1967 Referendum as well as exploring the issue of constitutional recognition.

There are often many misunderstandings as to what the 1967 Referendum meant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and for Australia in general. Visit the National Library fact sheet on the [Referendum](#) and explore the background, the referendum question and important historical documents that will give you valuable context.

One of the great champions of the movement to recognise the rights and dignity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was Sir Douglas Nicholls, an Aboriginal man from the Yorta Yorta nation and the Governor of South Australia—the first and only Indigenous Australian to hold such a position of leadership. [Bloodlines](#) tells the story of this great man. (Here is the full [transcript](#).)



In the activity below, you are being asked to exercise critical thinking skills. Go to the [Graduate Attribute 4 Resource](#) for assistance with these skills, prior to completing the activity. You will not finish all the activities at this point, but comprehend the scope and progress through all by midpoint in the unit.

ACTIVITY 1.2.3

The 1967 referendum was the first of many landmark events in the path to [reconciliation](#) between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians. **Make a list** of any other events

that have taken place in the past 40 years in support of this movement. The websites of the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) and the [National Sorry Day Committee](#) provide good starting points for your research.

Now, as you review your list, **consider the following questions:**

1. How well do you think Australia as a nation—and particularly the Australian government—is dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues? What are the reasons you have for this view?
2. How far do you think we have come as a nation in terms of Reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous communities?
3. What role does Reconciliation play in the recognition of rights and dignity in Australia?
4. What impact do you think Reconciliation will have on our understanding of human dignity in Australia?

³ Nelson Mandela, "[I am prepared to die: Nelson Mandela's statement from the dock at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial](#)" (speech, April 20, 1964, Palace of Justice, Pretoria Supreme Court, Pretoria, South Africa).

1.2.4 HUMAN DIGNITY IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN CONTEXTS

Law

The Australian Human Rights Commission was [established in 1986](#) to ensure “the principle that every person is free and equal in dignity and rights” (Division 2: 10A). [The Australian Human Rights Commission states](#): “Human rights are about recognising and respecting the inherent value and dignity of all people. Human rights standards are contained in internationally agreed human rights instruments recognised in Australian law.” This means that Australia must abide by international law that enshrines human dignity as a concept.

In addition, human dignity is embedded in Australian domestic law. One example of this is the [Migration Legislation Amendment \(Identification and Authentication\) Act 2004](#) which requires that “nothing in this Act authorises the carrying out of the identification test in a cruel, inhuman or degrading manner, or in a manner that fails to treat a person with humanity and with respect for human dignity” (258F; 261AF).

Another example is legislation on the standards required under Australian Law in providing services for people with disabilities. A determination on [Disability Service Standards](#) was made in 2010. This determination identifies the following as Standard 4: “Each consumer’s right to privacy, dignity and confidentiality in all aspects of his or her life is recognised and respected.”

Even the wide ranging powers of the [Anti-Terrorism Act \(No 2\) 2005](#) require that respect is shown for the human dignity of the person being detained: “A person being taken into custody, or being detained, under a preventative detention order:

- a. must be treated with humanity and with respect for human dignity; and
- b. must not be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; by anyone exercising authority under the order or implementing or enforcing the order” (Subdivision E: 105.33).

1.2.4 HUMAN DIGNITY IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN CONTEXTS

Codes of Conduct and Professional Practice

There are numerous examples of Professional Codes of Practice that articulate the importance of respect for human dignity.

The [WA Police Force](#) states that one of its core values is respect for human dignity.

The [Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council](#) declares that: “The nursing profession recognises the universal human rights of people and the moral responsibility to safeguard the inherent dignity and equal worth of everyone,” and “nurses respect the dignity, culture, ethnicity, values and beliefs of people receiving care and treatment, and of their colleagues.”

The [Australian Association of Social Workers](#) has a similar inclusion and identifies human dignity and worth as one of its five basic values.

The [Australian Council for International Development](#) identifies “valuing men and women, boys and girls in ways that respect the dignity, uniqueness and intrinsic worth of every person” as core to its work and vision.

The large, international company [PricewaterhouseCoopers](#) also identifies human dignity in its Code of Conduct, stating: ‘We treat our colleagues, clients and others with whom we do business with respect, dignity, fairness and courtesy.’

We can see, then, that human dignity is an important idea. It is time now to turn our attention to understanding what is meant by this term.

1.3 QUESTIONS FOR REVISION

Use these questions to ensure that you have a thorough understanding of the material in this module. *You need this* in order to prepare for the weekly tests on this and other material, as well as to inform the preparation of assessment task 2.

1. To what are we referring when we talk about human dignity?
2. McCabe says, “Most discussions of important moral and political issues, along with our everyday reflections on how others should be treated, occur against a background assumption of human dignity—for example, the idea that human beings have special standing shared by no other creatures on earth” (cited in Module 1.1).
 - a. Can you think of some contemporary issues where an understanding of human dignity must underpin our actions?
 - b. What role does human dignity play in each of these issues?
3. What atrocities were committed against humankind in WWII? How did this affect our understanding of human dignity?
4. How is human dignity recognised in human rights documents? (You should be able to give examples.) What impact does this recognition have on our understanding of human dignity today?
5. Describe some of the ways in which the dignity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has not been recognised in Australia. What has been and is being done to address these issues? What still needs to change? What does “Reconciliation” mean in this context?
6. Name 2 or 3 minority groups for whom human dignity has not been recognised historically (you may draw from your knowledge of Australian history, or from around the world). Has the situation changed in recent years? How? What impact have these changes had on the lives of the people affected?
7. Why do you think human dignity is explicitly discussed in many professional Codes of Practice in Australia?
8. “How has the concept of human dignity shaped our society?” Write a paragraph in response to this question, drawing together your key learnings from Module 1.