Racism@Uni Report of qualitative study of experience of racism and discrimination at Australian universities

Conducted by Think Change Resolve and Langton & Partners

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Think Change Resolve

Langton & Partners

Acknowledgement of Country

The authors of this Report, Think Change Resolve consultancy and Langton & Partners, wish to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands we live and work on, the Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation.

We also pay deep respects and express our gratitude for the gracious welcome we received to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and from the people of those lands when we do our work.

We understand that being in the presence of tradition, culture, knowledge and wisdom, on Country that embodies and provides insight through its people, is essential to make our contribution to the work.

We pay our respect to Elders past and present. We celebrate continuing custodianship and care for country, culture and community and commit ourselves to working in partnership with First Nations for voice and justice.

Disclaimer

This document has been prepared by Think Change Resolve and Langton & Partners for the benefit of the Australian Human Rights Commission, our client. The conclusions and advice included are given in good faith, on the basis of the evidence we accessed and all diligence in our work. This document should not be used or relied upon for any purpose outside of the scope of the document.

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Executive Summary

This qualitative study, commissioned by the Australian Human Rights Commission, examines the lived experiences of racism and discrimination among university staff and students from culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse backgrounds. Conducted between March and July 2025, the project engaged 310 participants through focus groups, small group sessions, and written submissions. A trauma-informed, culturally safe methodology was used, with recruitment co-designed alongside community leaders and members to ensure inclusivity and to ensure culturally safe engagements. Participants self-selected based on first-hand experiences of racism or discrimination, enabling a thematic analysis of systemic issues and thus identifying opportunities for change.

The findings reveal that racism and discrimination in Australian universities occur at interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels, with profound effects on wellbeing, safety, and progression in study and careers. Participants described a spectrum of harmful experiences, from microaggressions and stereotyping to overt abuse and identity-based targeting. These harms were often compounded for individuals with intersectional identities, such as those who also experienced discrimination based on disability, gender, or sexuality, creating cumulative disadvantage and exclusion. They were also reported to be more severe for students and staff with darker skin, described by some as anti-Black racism, acknowledging this is a complex concept crossing several of the groups in the project and varying as an experience within groups.

Within and across groups, including Indigenous, African, Pasifika, Jewish, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Asian participants, shared themes emerged. These included: the need to conceal aspects of identity for safety; people's actual individual identities being invisible in the face of assumptions made about them on the basis of, cultural, ethnic or religious background; being held to account in classes and across the university environment for the actions of organisations and governments from the Middle East to China; fear of retaliation if they speak up, and frustration at institutional inaction. Indigenous students and staff reported experiences of isolation, invalidation of their achievements, hostility to special assistance programs, opposition to Indigenous Knowledge frameworks, alongside a lack of recognition of cultural load.

The geopolitical conflict in the Middle East intensified hostility, polarisation, and feelings of unsafety for Middle Eastern, Palestinian and Jewish students and staff, with Middle Eastern and Palestinian participants also experiencing hostility from campus security, administration, service providers, and a sense of fear often exacerbated by visa related insecurity. Participants from other cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds reported a sense of their issues being 'drowned out.'

The impacts of racism and discrimination in universities are severe, far-reaching, and inadequately addressed. Leadership was widely perceived as disengaged in the substance of student and staff members' experiences, with anti-racism policies and reporting systems viewed as tokenistic, ineffective and in some cases retraumatising.

Student cultural clubs and individual community members feel they carry burdens supporting others in their community that universities should address directly. Academic freedom and free speech were inconsistently applied, with marginalised voices frequently constrained and hateful ones enabled. Students and staff reported inaction on serious allegations by security and administrative staff.

A distinction is important here. Student and staff member participants' views of leadership disengagement does not reduce their criticism of university culpability, or the failure of leadership they name. The same students and staff members also name this culpable disengagement as based in racist and discriminatory assumptions. They identify a lack of effort to put systems in place that would force attention on areas of failure, a disproportionate attention to external political criticism, and of an unconscious framing of their strategies on the assumption that the victims of racism and discrimination are themselves the problem.

This is not the first time universities have been found wanting in areas of great impact on students and staff. It is necessary in this domain as in others like it, to hold two different lenses up to view the problem, at the same time. First, it is vital to hear and recognise what students and staff who chose to participate in our study had to say, to acknowledge how awful are some of the experiences exposed and that is essential that racism at Australia's universities is curbed.

Then, as well, it is necessary to take a systems lens to the failures this whole picture represents. It is not reducible to leadership attitudes, although responsibility must of course rest with leaders. The failure points that need addressing are largely in systems, governance and administrative priority setting and fundamental failures in system accountabilities. There is also a clear impact of external criticism from political, media and civil society organisations, to which perhaps too much attention has been paid. A program of reform and intentional leadership is needed from the university sector's leadership.

Key actions include establishing and enforcing robust anti-racism policies; strengthening reporting and response systems; embedding cultural safety in governance, curriculum, and student services; increasing diverse representation at senior levels; providing targeted and culturally appropriate support to affected groups; and fostering safe, structured spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding across communities. These measures are intended to build accountability, cultural safety, and trust within Australia's universities, ensuring they are environments where all staff and students can thrive. The goal should be to move beyond the elimination of awful treatment of cultural, ethnic and religious minorities. It should embrace the important role of universities as places where deep, respectful and safe conversations can be held on the difficult issues facing society and the world.

The brief

Following the University Accord process, the Australian Human Rights Commission, hereafter the Commission, was asked by the Department of Education to provide advice to the Government on racism at universities. The Commission contracted three pieces of work to contribute quantitative, qualitative and literature analysis to their work. In addition, the Commission has conducted an extensive policy examination and consultations and will be the author of the advice to the Government.

The Commission engaged Think Change Resolve and Langton & Partners to conduct this qualitative analysis, as one component of the Commission's overall advice.

The brief for this project was to design and conduct focus groups with specific groups of university staff and students and analyse their answers to questions about racism at universities, including: their experiences, the impacts of those experiences, how they understand and think about them, the common experiences, and which experiences are either unique to a specific community or to a number of communities.

Our input is one of a number to an integrative report that the Commission will complete. Our work does not, for example, provide input on the prevalence of racism at universities, as our method is designed to explore the experiences of those who experience racism, nor what proportion they represent of the whole university population. The quantitative component, a survey, which the Commission have commissioned from another provider, should provide an insight into prevalence.

Our findings are based on a thematic analysis of what staff and students shared with us in focus groups and written submissions. We are a team that is not only skilled in qualitative methods but also includes members of most of the communities we spoke to. Our findings respect the generous, often vulnerable, offerings from staff and students who have been subject to some harrowing incidents and systemic discrimination. It is vital that universities take seriously the contributions of students and staff who participated in our study.

Finally, our brief is to focus on the experiences of university staff and students. Some of these are exacerbated by distressing geopolitical events and how they are playing out for specific communities in Australia. Our brief is limited to the focus on the experience of staff and students from those groups and how universities have supported them or exacerbated their negative experience. We have no brief to analyse the international policy or Australian political issues related to geopolitics. Those are important questions, but not within our mandate.

The work for this report was conducted by consulting firm Think Change Resolve Pty Ltd, working with Langton & Partners, between March and July 2025.

Our findings are spelled out in the Findings section of the Report and summarised as a standalone document in **Appendix A**.

Language used in this report

The experience of racism and discrimination on university campuses refers to the personal, first-hand realities of individuals from religious, ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds, as they navigate academic, social, and institutional environments. It is essential to recognise its multiple and intersecting forms. The *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* at S. 9 (1) is clear in stating that racial discrimination is unlawful:

It is unlawful for a person to do any act involving a distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of any human right or fundamental freedom in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.

In the specific context within the university, the direct experience of racism and discrimination is defined as the aggregate and interacting consequences of racist encounters across multiple levels:

- **Individual Racism and Discrimination:** bullying, exclusion, or stereotyping based on race, religion or cultural background;
- **Internalised Racism:** acceptance and internalisation of negative stereotypes of a particular ethnicity or cultural group;
- **Institutional Racism and Discrimination:** policies, rules, or practices that disadvantage certain groups, even if unintended (e.g. admissions, curriculum, disciplinary processes); and
- **Structural Racism and Discrimination:** broader system of power, history and social norms that produces and reinforces inequalities across society and thus, absent effective interventions, in universities.

Further discussion of these forms of racism is provided at **Appendix B**. A summary of Background Literature is at **Appendix C**.

Method

Our Team

Think Change Resolve (TCR), with Langton & Partners, was commissioned by the Commission to lead this project. The team has significant expertise and direct experience, including:

- Extensive experience in higher education consulting and anti-racism strategy across a variety of policy, research, and institutional settings
- Specialised expertise in facilitating inclusive, sensitive and safe engagement with culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse communities
- Trauma-informed facilitation skills to address subject matter appropriately
- A culturally diverse team led by individuals with primary experience across the targeted communities, and with wide expertise from varied professional backgrounds and
- A strengths-based, solutions-focused approach, designed to generate actionable insights and support systemic, long-term change.

Scope and qualitative focus

Our method was based on recruiting people with first-hand experiences of racism in universities. As such, we are reporting back on these negative experiences. However, our findings do not suggest that all students and staff have experienced racism. Australian universities have a diverse population of students and staff and can be a welcoming place for many.

After the 57 group and individual sessions had been conducted and 125 written submissions received, we analysed for themes common across groups and unique to one or more specific groups. This theme selection was checked, both across the team and with co-design experts. Quotes were selected that best demonstrated these themes. Where experiences were shared across multiple groups, we selected representative quotes that illustrate the point clearly rather than repeating similar sentiments from every group. This approach avoids unnecessary length without losing substantive detail. Unless otherwise indicated, it can be assumed that the experiences described were echoed by participants from other groups as well. We do identify instances where experiences are unique to one or two groups of participants.

This report identifies and examines individual experiences of racism and suggests recommendations for areas where universities can improve their governance, policies and practices to tackle racism and discrimination.

We developed a Project Plan, which was reviewed and endorsed by the Ethics Centre and the Commission (**Appendix D**).

Ethical conduct

We sought independent advice from The Ethics Centre, including reviewing methods, protocols, support processes, and cultural safety. We also sought ad hoc advice from The Ethics Centre throughout the project lifecycle on ethical approaches to issues as they arose.

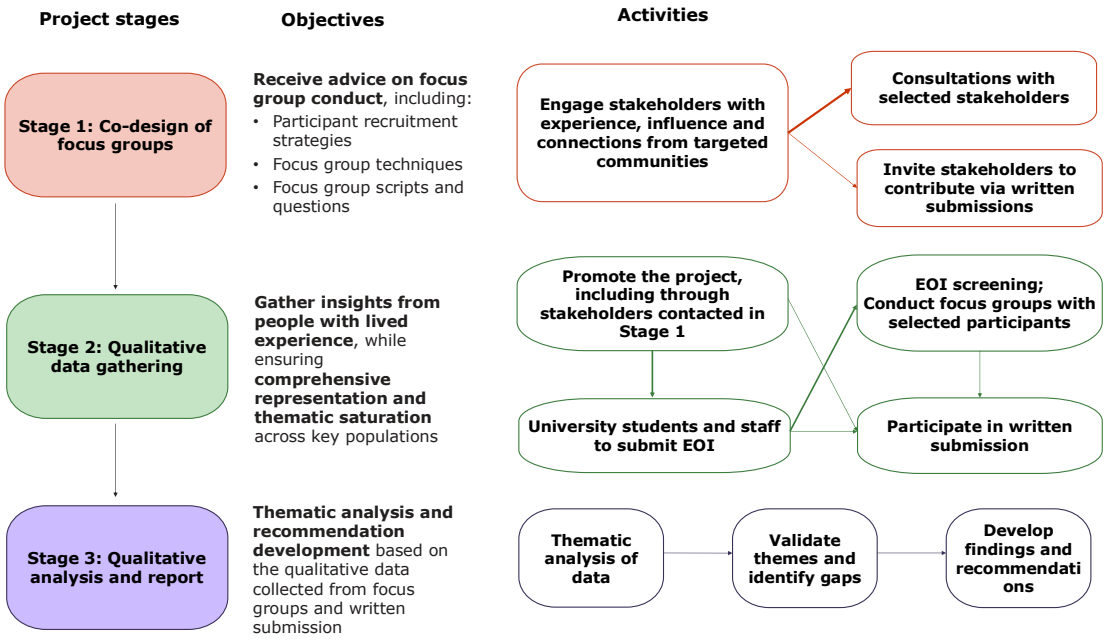
On the advice of The Ethics Centre, we adopted an expanded consent approach which was grounded in First Nations-led, trauma-aware, community-informed principles, and as an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

The key features of our approach to consent were:

- Participant Agency: We provided multiple ways for participants to contribute, including focus groups and written submissions. We also conducted small group or one-on-one interviews when appropriate. This meant individuals could choose the format and timing that felt safest and most comfortable and could also decide how much detail they wished to share.
- Community Dynamics: We were transparent about how focus groups would be composed, how contributions would be used, and any potential implications of participation. This happened during recruitment, and during focus groups and interviews.
- Safety and Transparency: We screened registrations to ensure that group composition was culturally safe. Participants were encouraged to flag concerns during registration, which informed both facilitator preparation and group design.
- Real-time Validation: Facilitators used check-ins during sessions to confirm that we were hearing participants' accounts of their experiences accurately. This included paraphrasing key points back to the speaker, confirming how they wanted certain experiences described. We made clear that participants could rephrase or reframe their input at any time, during the session and could indicate if they wished us not to use their contribution after the event.
- Flexible Withdrawal: We ensured participants could leave a session at any point, take a break, or as noted, request that their contributions not be included. This included if they wished to make that request after participating in a focus group or submitting a written contribution. There were no consequences for choosing not to continue.

Three-stage process

We conducted the project in three stages as depicted in the figure below.



Further detail on each of the stages is available in the project plan in **Appendix C**.

Resources for facilitators

Our team were supplied with a detailed method for the co-design sessions with stakeholders to ensure a consistent approach was adopted across all groups. This method is available at **Appendix E** (co-design sessions facilitators' kit) and **Appendix F** (focus group facilitators' kit). At **Appendix G** is a copy of the Expression of Interest form filled in online by staff and students interested in participating.

Following the focus groups, summaries were provided to co-design stakeholders to check if the range of topics discussed in the focus groups broadly accorded with the expectations of co-design partners. It is important to note that these were not summaries of our analysis, which had not been undertaken at that stage. These summaries are available at **Appendix H**.

Focus group facilitators received refresher training in trauma-informed group facilitation. The slides from this training are provided at **Appendix I**.

Copies of presentations to the Commission's Advisory Committee are at **Appendices J** and **K**.

Participant Recruitment

Our recruitment strategy was co-designed in partnership with community leaders and stakeholder organisations to ensure inclusivity and relevance to each target cohort. We began by conducting stakeholder consultations with individuals from organisations and the various communities in focus for our work, and with community members

who are key student, staff and academic office holders in their universities or in networks of staff and students. These sessions guided the development of our outreach materials and the structure of our recruitment process.

Following the co-design stage, we developed an online Expression of Interest (EOI) form that was disseminated through networks and social media channels. Each expression of interest was reviewed to ensure the eligibility of participants and alignment with the project's thematic focus, i.e. that they are staff members, are or have been students within the last three years and wished to make a contribution about an experience of racism or discrimination. Participants were then allocated to focus groups based on the identities and experiences they self-nominated, with particular care taken to respect any flagged safety concerns or intra-group dynamics. This screening process also allowed us to maintain thematic saturation while preserving participant wellbeing and comfort across culturally sensitive groupings.

Through the form, participants either expressed interest in taking part in a focus group or provided a written submission of their experiences. For some staff and students, this afforded a safer way to make their contribution, without having to describe distressing material in company, or avoiding a perceived risk of judgment from other community members or simply being able to make their contribution at their convenience rather than fitting in with the focus group timetable.

Participation

Table 1 below presents the total number of participants in focus groups and the total number of written submissions received. The figures are divided into the groups targeted in this report. Please note that many participants self-identified with multiple cultural or ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Muslim and Asian, Indigenous and Jewish, African and Muslim, etc), so the figures in Table 1 reflect a rough indication of the number of participants per group. Similarly, several individuals self-identified as both staff and students.

In total, we ran 57 sessions (focus groups, small group sessions and individual interviews), referenced in this report as FG01 to FG57. We received and analysed 125 submissions, referenced in this report as WS001 to WS125.

Table 1 Number of participants in focus groups and written submissions

	Focus groups			Written Submissions			Total		
Group	**Staff**	**Students**	**Total**	**Staff**	**Students**	**Total**	**Staff**	**Students**	**Grand total**
Asian	9	61	70	9	24	33	18	85	**103**
Indigenous	9	22	31	15	15	30	24	37	**61**
Jewish	11	14	25	13	7	20	24	21	**45**
Middle Eastern	8	4	12	2	6	8	10	10	**20**
Muslim	5	6	11	6	9	15	11	15	**26**

	Focus groups			Written Submissions			Total		
African*	1	5	6	3	10	13	4	15	**19**
Pasifika and Australian South Sea Islander*	-	14	14	1	2	3	1	16	**17**
Intersectional**	-	16	16	-	-	-	-	16	**16**
Other***	-	-	-	1	2	3	1	2	**3**
Total	43	142****	185	50	75**	125	93	217	**310**

* Shortly after we began work, the Commission asked us to expand the project scope to include one focus group each from Pasifika and African students.

We initially planned to run the Pasifika focus group online. During planning, we were offered the opportunity to collaborate with a well-established organisation based at a University recognised for its strong community connections and support. We took up this offer, working in partnership with them to recruit participants to an in-person focus group, which one of our leads co-facilitated with a well-respected Pasifika academic. This focus group was designed in a culturally appropriate form, as a Talanoa, using traditional and effective ways of creating safe space and culturally appropriate discussion.

We worked hard to recruit African students, an inherently diverse group from a very large part of the world, many countries and cultures, and whose numbers are not large in Australian universities. We were supported by some African academics and a civil society organisation advocating for African Australians, and we got important input from African students.

** We ran specific groups for women, LGBTIQA+ people, first-in-family to attend university and people with disability. People who have submitted written responses have also indicated intersectional identities, but we are not reporting these figures in this table to avoid double-counting submissions.

*** The 'Other' category includes participants who did not identify with the specific communities targeted for this project. Although we did not recruit specifically, some individuals contributed through written submissions, and we included them because of their valuable input.

**** Of the 142 students who participated in focus groups, 73 were international and 69 were domestic. Of the 75 students who submitted a written response, 32 were international and 43 were domestic.

Map of the 34 universities represented in this project

Learnings from the effort it took to attract sufficient participants

We found it more difficult than expected to get participation from all groups. We engaged co-design partners and leaders from each community we aimed to involve. Our aim in these follow-up discussions was to go over focus group design, recruitment strategies and to check if we were missing any viable recruitment pathway. These community leaders were very helpful when we went back to them, confirming our sense of what was happening, and some of them publicising the opportunity through their networks.

We adapted our approach where engagement was lower. This included offering smaller focus groups or one-on-one interviews to support cultural safety; scheduling additional sessions at different times to accommodate caring, work, and study responsibilities; increasing promotion through informal, trusted channels; and providing very clear reassurances about confidentiality and independence of the project.

We ultimately achieved more than sufficient participation. We also noted some of the findings from the feedback we received at this stage as relevant to the subject matter of the study, namely, contemporary experiences of racism and discrimination by staff and students across all groups. These insights included:

- The impact of cost-of-living pressures on students, disproportionately impacting those with family responsibilities (a disproportionate number of Indigenous students), making it less likely they felt they could find time to contribute to the focus groups.
- The emotional complexity of discussing traumatic experiences in a group, even of people from one's own community, re-triggering bad feelings or exposing internalised self-doubt about the legitimacy of one's own feelings.
- A sense in some communities that they had been talking about these issues, including to other similar exercises, for some time and lacked faith that participating this time would lead to changes.
- That this is exacerbated by polarisation of views in the current heightened political environment, increasing the risk of feeling disapproved of for any unorthodox ways of expressing one's feelings.
- That the current politically charged atmosphere on campuses regarding the conflict in the Middle East "occupies all the space," leaving "no room" for other experiences of racism and discrimination.

Confidence in our findings

Based on qualitative research standards and our project scope, we considered sufficient participation to be reached when we achieved thematic saturation, determined by recognition of recurring patterns in experiences, within and across target cohorts. We also considered the indicative participation numbers discussed with the Commission and that this was a fixed price, 6-month, consultancy project, not a multi-year, many times more expensive piece of funded research. For example, African and Pasifika participation was added after the project had started, via a single student focus group for each.

Using all of these factors as a guide, we were very satisfied with the degree of thematic saturation we achieved for the groups overall, i.e. for the common themes across all the groups. We were also confident of our findings from within each group. However long this type of work goes on, more insights may always come up, but for all the groups in this study, we achieved the state where we were hearing repeated themes and common experiences.

Findings

Our findings are divided into four key areas:

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff
2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in addressing racism and discrimination
3. Policies and systems to report, deter and address racism and discrimination are inadequate
4. Universities fail to meaningfully and effectively promote cultural safety and inclusion

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

1.1 Members of all groups described instances of microaggressions, bullying and discrimination in classrooms and other university settings

Participants described microaggressions as an everyday feature of university life. One Middle Eastern staff member put it as, "one of the most common manifestations of racism on campus as a staff member is […] comments from colleagues […] not necessarily directly towards me, but commenting on particular groups of people […] saying that someone has a funny accent or laughing at particular expressions of culture […] those kinds of just mocking comments are probably the most common thing in the area that I work in" (FG032). Staff and students recounted constant subtle slights, such as being talked over in meetings, having their names mispronounced or mocked, being mistaken for another person of similar backgrounds, or facing assumptions about their intelligence, language skills, or belonging. These moments were often brushed off by others but accumulated into a persistent sense of alienation. As one Jewish student described, "It is often more covert and subtle and not typically aimed at me personally" (WS025).

These experiences are often reported as being constant and coming from all directions. "I have experienced racism every stage of my career […] in university, it still happens […] from people [who] have authority over me, people on the same level, or students even" (Asian staff member, FG21). Participants described the difficulty of challenging these behaviours, especially when they were minimised as misunderstandings or "just jokes". A Muslim student noted, "It's more about the attitudes which are in hidden form […] you are feeling that something is happening to you […] but you do not have any visible answers to let other people know" (FG34). An Asian student put it this way: "If it's being punched, I can call the cops […] but those

kinds of emotional damage are really hard to quantify, and it's really hard to seek help from, because you didn't actually have a record" (FG04).

Many said they had become desensitised over time or chose not to speak up to avoid being seen as overly sensitive or confrontational. "I just don't pay attention to it. [It is a] strong self-protective strategy. Got to a point of not letting anyone affect who I am […] I don't listen to the haters" (Indigenous student, FG49). A Pasifika student, who went on to outline her distress at how she has adapted to racist comments or actions, shared, "I would watch my grandmother endure hardships from people and her response would be, 'I'm used to it, this is normal' [… now] I feel like we feel the same way!" (FG40).

While microaggressions were widespread, some participants reported experiencing explicit racism. This included slurs, threats, and direct discrimination**.** The intensity of the incidents reported was more extreme for participants with darker skin. One student recounted being yelled at with a racial slur on campus, saying, "We are walking around on campus. Some might just come up and just yell 'n***' […] which is just crazy because [… it's] 2020and we're still going around saying that sh*" (African student, FG52).

Some participants also shared being physically assaulted or feeling intimidated. For some, these incidents were perceived as racially or politically motivated. A Palestinian student described incidents they experienced on campus, for instance, that someone "[…] approached me and feigned a trip, using his elbow forcefully against my ribs to break his fall. He then went about accusing me of obstructing his path. I was breathless and terrified. […] The following week, while working on a paper in the study hall. I heard someone whisper in my ear 'how are your ribs' […] It was the same person […] He was grinning. He then grabbed my shoulder, really hard, and said 'see you around'" (WS030).

1.2 Members of all groups described harm to their wellbeing, resilience, and progression, with some expressing futility, loss of faith in university study or their career

Students and staff described the emotional strain of experiencing racism and discrimination, which impacted their everyday university life

This included feelings of stress, self-doubt, and burnout. For some participants, this ongoing emotional stress impacted their mental and physical health, including "disturbed sleep, nightmares, chronic depression, anxiety, and unexplained body pain" (Asian staff member, WS103). One participant described, "feeling completely exhausted, depleted, out of patience to try and explain again what's been happening to [them]" (Jewish staff member, FG01).

Experiences of racism and discrimination also impacted some participants' confidence and sense of belonging in the university. Participants shared: "I often found myself emotionally exhausted, questioning my own actions and worth, and explaining my

distress to friends who witnessed the toll it took on me" (Muslim student, WS024). "The racial discrimination is gradually undermining my self-confidence […] this kind of invisible weight of bias feels like constant self-doubt. I always ask myself, 'Am I good enough?' and causing hesitation or losing some opportunities that I rightfully earn" (Asian student, FG04).

Some Indigenous students also shared feelings of self-doubt, particularly when they have been the target of attacks regarding their legitimacy in being at university. An Indigenous student shared having heard students and staff expressing the view "that Indigenous students were there [at university] because they were Indigenous" (FG49). For some first-in-family students, these experiences were compounded by the challenges of navigating a completely new environment and institution. An Indigenous first-in-family student shared, "It's the connections that you're coming in against people who have all that social capital of […] networks, and then they've got the resources of family who know how to navigate the system. So, you already kind of feel like you're behind" (FG19).

Some students described delays in their academic progress caused by racism, structural barriers and a lack of tailored support

A Muslim-Palestinian student shared, "It reached a point where the stress and emotional toll became too much, and I had to withdraw from units just to protect my mental health. I didn't feel safe or heard, and there was no real support from the university […] impacted my studies […] delayed my progress" (WS066). An African student recalled the severe impact on their degree, "[…] the thing standing between now me and my success is our relationship as supervisor and students. I don't want to be treated the way you are treating me. I don't want to come from a meeting, and I need three days to recover emotionally before I start doing my work" (FG31).

Delays in degree progression were especially common among students who were balancing study with work, care or community responsibilities. In a story both positive about their community but sobering about the challenges, Pasifika students talked of some senior members of their group taking longer to finish degrees due to spending time on supporting and defending younger students across the university: "I deferred my studies to continue to do this work, it was a sacrifice I chose to make, but if I hadn't, I would have graduated years ago" (FG40).

Participants also shared experiences of racism during placements, such as cultural antagonism, lack of support, and institutional mishandling of complaints, which have also led to disruptions of students' degrees. One student observed the impact of a peer doing a placement at a hospital: "[A friend's] colleague kept triggering this girl with some really critical political issues around like China, Taiwan […] she reported these things to the university, said I experienced racism, and the university made an investigation […] But like the university [and] the hospital, they are like permanent co-workers together […] so [the university] just blaming the students for all the things and […] said: 'We think you are not right. We think social work is not the right subject

for you. We hope you either transfer to another degree or you just choose to drop out.' [… She] just run out from this degree." (Asian student, FG08).

Staff described encountering barriers to advancement that were not experienced by their white or Anglo-Australian colleagues

Staff spoke about how racism and exclusion within the university produced exhaustion, burnout, and internalised futility that directly undermined their professional advancement. The impact was explained by an Indigenous staff member who was also a student, "My health was seriously impacted. I was forced to compromise my career, my ability to contribute meaningfully to the university, and ultimately to abandon a unique and innovative project into which I had invested extraordinary effort and achieved astounding results" (WS110). Similarly, a Muslim staff member explained how perceived bias around race, name, and religion discouraged them from even applying for promotion: "I'm not going to get it anyway, you know, because of my name, because of my perceived race and religion […] I didn't apply for promotion for a very long time […] I'm gonna have to be like 3 or 4 times more brilliant for them to see me as equal. So why bother?" (FG37). A Jewish professional staff member said, "It has made me less trusting of my workplace and the people I work with … (my) self-esteem has been affected severely and has risen my levels of anxiety and fear" (WS027).

The impact of racism and discrimination was said to be especially prominent when staff were also suffering from a heavy cultural load, because of the need to navigate a system that did not recognise or value their ways of working. One Indigenous academic described, "I get overloaded with stuff and set up to fail" (FG03), referring to the various commitments expected from Indigenous staff that impact their career progression. This experience was echoed in other focus groups: "One university I worked at, there were only six Aboriginal academics in the whole university, and there were about 20 committees. So, you're constantly getting invitations to join committees […] It comes with a really heavy personal cost in the end, and usually to your career as well, because you don't have time to do all the things that the other academics" (Indigenous academic, FG46). Another academic in the same focus group explained, "recognition of cultural load for Indigenous staff is really important […] academic workload guidelines for a reduction in teaching load for Indigenous staff to recognise cultural load that we carry in terms of other functions across the university and in the school" (Indigenous academic, FG46).

Performance evaluation systems were raised by participants as a common site of concern. Academics reported that student feedback, which directly influences contract renewal and promotion, was often racially biased. An Asian staff member shared that, "feedback controls our practice, our pedagogy […] and it certainly controls our chances at promotion […] Student feedback is gendered, sexist and racialised […] This is how racism manifests in policy [and] in promotions" (FG14). In another example, an Indigenous staff member recounted: "A student said that to me in class, when I

was conducting a tutorial, that Aboriginal people were all just a bunch of dole bludgers, and we were lazy, and we didn't do any work. I was a little bit upset, but I said, 'Well, actually, I'm here to show you that that is incorrect. I'm here. I'm getting a degree. I'm getting my PhD. I'm teaching, you know.' But that student just had a really closed mind. […] When it came to student evaluations, the student wrote in his evaluation that I was a racist person, and that I shouldn't be teaching" (FG03).

Staff also described pressure to conform to dominant norms, such as the Anglo-Australian communication styles being set as the standard for competent leadership. One Asian academic reflected, "By encouraging […] qualities of leadership defined by Anglo-white male model, I felt as if I was contributing to the assimilation process" (FG51).

1.3 There are shared experiences of being singled out and subjected to stereotypes that diminished their role as university staff or students

Many students and staff described being overlooked, dismissed, or actively excluded, particularly when their ethnic or cultural identities were visible or assumed. These instances happened across different settings, including the classroom and other campus spaces.

Asian students and staff reported being ignored and experiencing overt racism that impacted their studies and careers

Many students reported feeling left out in the classroom. As a student reported: "A white lecturer explicitly expressed disdain whenever Asians asked questions, whilst he responded willingly to local white students" (WS022).

Experiences of overt racism, sometimes framed as "jokes" or casual comments, created deep emotional harm and entrenched a sense of not belonging. A student shared: "A group of girls I was sitting with in class and had been for the past few weeks, started 'joking' about the way my eyes are 'slanted' and that I smelled like noodles. That formulated into persistent name-calling, such as Jackie Chan, Leslie Chow and even chink. It was obvious I was uncomfortable. And it was obvious it was not a joke, but more a perpetuation of the way they actually see me, making me feel less than human" (WS058).

Another student described racism as impacting their self-confidence. Their negative experience after attending a drawing workshop at their university made them feel "unwelcome and discouraged, to the point where I started associating drawing with a sense of inadequacy. Even now, I carry that feeling with me […] that I'm somehow not 'qualified'" (WS042).

Despite being domestic or long-term residents in Australia, Asian students and staff reported being frequently mistaken for foreign or temporary, creating a persistent sense of unbelonging. One student recalled: "I was sorting out enrolment issues in my first year […] and I was on a phone call with a staff member […] they were assuming I

was an international student, they were giving me the wrong information […] from seeing my name, they easily skipped over my student status as domestic, and was giving me information that they would give an international student" (WS023).

Being visibly Asian often triggered unsolicited assumptions about political views, language skills, or background, leading to condescension or interrogation. Participants reported being asked questions, such as "How often do you speak English? What do you think about the Chinese government? […] It's like [the colleague] was assessing: Am I [an] assimilated migrant or am I a file?" (Asian staff member, FG21).

Some Asian students still recall being both isolated and neglected during COVID-19, and some were also subject to racist attacks as if implicated personally in the pandemic

East Asian students described experiencing overt racism, both online and in person, linking them to COVID-19, including slurs and discriminatory behaviour from peers. A student shared an experience of racism related to COVID-19: "A student was making a whole series of really discriminatory comments about Asians in regards to COVID […] when my friend and I went to the college heads […] to report it […] an official report was filed […] there was no procedure. They said '[The incident] happened online, so it's out of our hands'" (FG33).

Universities and leadership were largely silent during this time, which many students interpreted as complicity. "The Prime Minister […] stood up and said, 'If you're an international student you can't fund yourself, go back to your country.' No university has spoken against it […] It's like face like heat on your face […] saying it's okay to be racist in Australia" (FG33).

For some, anti-Asian racism during COVID-19 was their first experience of feeling racially targeted in Australia. Others described subtle yet constant reminders of racial othering during the pandemic, such as classmates associating Asian students with the virus. "During the pandemic, people are going to say something like 'China virus' in front of you […] they didn't mean to do it. They didn't realise [it was] racist. Just those really minor differences" (FG08).

International students were very conscious of being treated differently, in a negative, non-inclusive way

International students described being routinely grouped together, either by default or due to peers' reluctance to work with them; "When forming group assignments, it's challenging for me to collaborate with non-Chinese groups. Even when I do manage to join such groups, I often find myself being marginalised" (Asian student, WS050). This is affirmed by an academic: "When they have a group presentation, I make sure that international students are in each group. So that they don't [get] put into one group. But there's definitely some [domestic] students [who] have a reluctance to be paired up with international students" (Asian staff member, FG51).

This exclusion is exacerbated by the challenge that language and cultural differences bring, contributing to feelings of exclusion and misjudgement. One international student described how language processing time and perceived speaking speed impacted her engagement: "When a teacher asks a question in class I might need just three extra seconds to augment my thoughts. But local students always answer first. So over time, I've been labelled as [dis]engaged, not because I don't have ideas, but because the environment rewards speed over depth" (Asian student, FG04). "It disadvantaged me during my studies. I had to work harder to keep up with domestic students who spoke fast and were always more confident to speak first" (Asian student, WS022). Some students also shared instances of feeling othered due to speaking in a different accent, "Being told to repeat myself because they don't understand my accent and that I should speak with an Australian accent" (African student, WS099).

Students also reported being aware that tutors and peers viewed them as academically weaker, a stereotype tied to their visa status and English proficiency. "[The assumption that international students] come here just to work and make money […] they just don't care about the unit. Whereas if your domestic student is applying for an extension, it's more like, 'Oh my God, they're really in trouble, we have to help them'" (Asian student tutor, FG33). "Every time in a group setting when I give out a suggestion, they will behave like they did not understand, then another person who is not recognised as marginalised or a white person says the exact suggestion or idea and they are supported […]" (African student, WS091).

The financial dynamic between international students and universities also created mistrust, particularly when paired with under-investment in services or support. "Commercial academia is a business […] the transactional nature has really undermined some level of trust. Students of colour feel like they are not valued. […] They're cash cows. Every student I've ever encountered, international student, has had a racist experience on campus […] university marginalises them, […] others them, racialises them. […] " (Asian staff member, FG14).

Pasifika students experienced stereotyping and assumptions that erased their identity and sense of belonging

Pasifika students consistently described how racist assumptions and stereotypes shaped their everyday university experiences. Students described being stereotyped based on appearance and presumed foreignness, sharing: "My mum spent a lot of money for me to undertake English classes as I had an accent. When I got to uni, people would say to me, wow you speak really good English" (FG40).

There was also an erasure of cultural complexity, such as the assumptions that all Pasifika students were cousins or that they knew everything about every Pacific nation. These patterns of treating Pasifika students as interchangeable reflected a lack of institutional knowledge and respect for Pasifika identities. These experiences contributed to feelings of not belonging and emotional exhaustion: "These micro-

aggressions are exhausting. We have to choose whether we fight back or just ignore it. It's exhausting" (FG40).

Despite these barriers, students emphasised a powerful commitment to community and collective uplift, as the agency, innovation and pro-active determination of the Pasifika students have resulted in the creation of programs, scholarships and communities. As one student shared, "were it not for [name of a Pasifika club's first president], I wouldn't be here. He has sacrificed so much for us. We just don't know how to repay that back" (FG40).

Others reported on the racist stereotypes of loudness, violence, or criminality, affecting how they navigated shared spaces. Two Pasifika students who play sport (rugby and netball) recounted accounts of university sports referees targeting Pasifika students on the assumption that they would be more violent in their play than other students, even though both experienced aggression from other non-Pasifika players (FG40).

African students experienced overt racism, systemic neglect, emotional burdens and deep institutional mistrust

African students described confronting both overt racism and racialised assumptions that shaped everyday life at university. Simply existing in public spaces could trigger suspicion. One student explained: "I forgot that if you were in like a group of Black people, people would be like really afraid to approach you […] people would like stay in their rooms. Which was really weird to see" (FG52). This fear-driven response reinforced stereotypes of Black people as inherently unsafe for others to be around and created a sense of exclusion for those students. Stereotyping extended to assumptions about personality and identity. As another student from the same focus group shared, "They just think you're a certain type of person just based on how you talk and look […] like, oh, you're part of like this and that […] which is kind of dragged" (FG52).

These judgments shaped how students were seen both socially and academically. They also contrasted with the accounts of African students that they were subjected to more vicious racism, including violent attacks, which they associated with being visibly darker-skinned.

Structural barriers also shaped access to university resources. One student noted: "If we were trying to, say, book a venue, that might cause some problems because they look at us and they're like, 'Oh… I'm a bit cautious to do that'" (FG52). These everyday obstacles reflected how racism was embedded in institutional processes.

The psychological toll of these experiences was deep and enduring. Constant exposure to exclusion, judgment and inequity impacted students' mental health and sense of worth. One student wrote: "I attempted suicide four times. I ended up having long term mental health issues […] I don't want to pursue higher education because of what I went through even though I am bright" (WS004). Another described how

racism left them emotionally disoriented: "I was overwhelmed, and it got me by surprise. And you don't know how to act next" (WS064). These accounts revealed the heavy emotional burden students carried, often alone.

Efforts to report racism were often ineffective. As one student described: "They actively don't respond to you. […] They make sure to frustrate you by passing your case to different people until nothing is done" (WS004). Others spoke to the emotional difficulty of reporting other students: "It doesn't feel right to accuse or complain regarding the racism when the action is done by someone who is close (like a friend or someone who is closely working with you)" (WS064). These dynamics left many students to navigate harm without support.

Indigenous students and staff both suffered attacks that would not have occurred if not perceived to be benefiting from special treatment

Indigenous students described feeling isolated or ignored, particularly after disclosing their identity. One student reflected, "Is it okay that every time we walk into a classroom, we can be a subject of political debate?" (FG27). Being the "only one" in classrooms or faculties compounded this sense of marginalisation, as students were approached to advise on cultural matters or support peers, even at the cost of their own wellbeing and academic progress.

One student shared their experience of being the only Indigenous student in their Indigenous Studies elective, and after being contacted by another student for an interview on Indigenous topics, "the next week, it's like she never met me in her entire life". Others spoke of the common experience of hiding their Indigenous identity: "Feel like a shame to tell people you were Indigenous […] get to a point of not wanting to be honest about it" with fear that revealing it would lead to tokenism or exclusion (FG49).

Indigenous students reported being routinely accused, explicitly or implicitly, of not being "real" students because of scholarships or other targeted programs. These assumptions diminished their achievements and invalidated their presence in academic spaces. As a student shared: "You are a student, but you are not, as you are not paying as much rent, you have things handed to you, and you have a scholarship. You are a student, but not a real student; you have to be proud to have an identity intact, but not too proud" (FG49). There were instances of specific targeting of Indigenous students by both other students and staff on this basis. These views positioned students not just as undeserving, but as representatives of broader societal grievances. "At some point this lady (teacher) had said to her like, 'Why do Aboriginal people all want everything for free? Why don't they go back to their communities and fix stuff?'" (FG27).

In some instances, legitimate Indigenous-specific support services were treated as unethical advantages, impacting participants' studies and wellbeing. A student shared being reported for academic misconduct after receiving help from the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS): "I was flagged potentially for academic

misconduct [because] I had submitted an assignment that had comments written on it from my ITAS tutor […] providing support for assignments […] my graduation was supposed to be in a month […] I withdrew my honours application" (FG55).

Indigenous staff described being passed over for professional development unless their involvement could visibly benefit the institution. They were excluded from skill-building roles but placed front and centre when opportunities aligned with commercial or public-facing goals. One explained, "You get chosen last for any opportunities to actually develop the skills needed to succeed in academia, but if it's an opportunity where you can expose your Aboriginal community to more research or to establish a football program or health program that can make the university millions of dollars, then the opportunities are thrown at you from all angles. You have to choose either to lose your cultural integrity and be the 'face' they want and that makes money or keep your cultural integrity and accept you will never be given any access to any opportunities to do anything" (WS031).

Indigenous students and staff were one group that described being subjected to lateral violence, resulting from discrimination within their communities, including on campus

For Indigenous participants, lateral violence often took the form of questioning or denial of their Indigenous identity, thereby invalidating their first-hand or direct experience and cultural authority. A student described such internal targeting: "because I'm pale, it was, 'Hang on! You're white, you're not black,' you know. 'You can't speak for this. You can't do that.' And you know, you felt like you were rolling out the credentials, each and every time" (FG27).

This was echoed by another staff member, who experienced questioning about their Aboriginality from Indigenous students: "Students at the university assume that because I am an intelligent, light-skinned Aboriginal female academic, and not the retired male football player, that I have no right to be an Aboriginal lecturer" (WS031).

A staff member also shared an experience of having their Aboriginality questioned by other Aboriginal staff: "I rang the woman that did my induction with HR, who I provided my confirmation of Aboriginality […] to just check if I'm you know, registered in the system as Aboriginal. And she's like, 'Yeah, of course you are'. And I said, 'Well, I'm just going to a meeting where this woman has told everyone that I'm not'. Anyway, I was pretty scarred from that experience, and it took me a while to pick myself up […] That's probably the worst black on black lateral violence" (FG46).

1.4 Global political events intensified racism and division on campus, leaving affected groups isolated, stigmatised, and unsupported

October 7 intensified harmful assumptions and divisions, with students and staff identifying as Palestinian, Jewish, Middle Eastern, Arab and Muslim negatively impacted in some similar ways

Several Palestinian and Jewish students shared similar experiences of having their views assumed by others, including assumptions that, by dint of their identities they had hateful views of the other community. As a Palestinian student put it, "Just existing is controversial […] I'm just introducing myself, I didn't ask your take on anything" (FG17). Jewish students described similar frustration. A Jewish academic stated, "The approach which we are seeing on campus is defining Jews as 'Anti-Palestinian' which is absolutely not true" (WS015).

Both groups of students described being put on the spot in classes and held to account for the Palestinian authorities, for Hamas or for the Israeli government and Israeli Defence Force. A Vice Chancellor allegedly called a Middle Eastern student into their office and was "full on yelling at me, saying, I'm [b]ringing […] criminals onto campus". The student made it clear they were not involved or endorsing the encampment (FG17).

Middle Eastern and Palestinian participants shared their view that the current climate has intensified the long and often ignored history of anti-Arab racism. "I have to say, after you know, having been at universities working at universities for over 15 years, I've never seen it worse than this. In terms of suppressing or the fear around expressing views in university" (FG32).

This often led to them being singled out, stereotyped, and silenced, directly linking their ethnicity to assumptions about their political allegiance. Another participant shared, "I say, you know, I'm from the Middle East. And they'll be like, 'Oh, you're not like them. You grew up here.' The freedom people feel to say these things is shocking" (Middle Eastern staff member, FG32). As a Jewish staff member indicated, "I think that sort of homogenising of Jewish experience, I think, is really a form of racism. It really is a form of antisemitism to make the assumption that people, by virtue of their identity, ethnic background, religion or whatever, all sort of think and feel and experience things the same way" (FG43).

Safety concerns were prominent within these groups. A Middle Eastern student described, "I am very weary of where I am, who I'm with, who's around me. Every time I walk into a building, I have to know where the exits are […] how close it is to the men's bathroom stuff like that" (Middle Eastern student, FG05). A Jewish student shared a similar state of fear and hyper vigilance, "People literally will... map their class, avoid certain areas of campus to just do that... I literally am like watching... how can I like literally position myself in a way that it's like least observed" (FG06).

As a result of these recurring experiences, many students described concealing their identity altogether. Some Jewish students reported deciding not to wear Jewish symbols: "I didn't wear a Star of David necklace on campus for over a year, because I just didn't want to be openly identified as a Jewish student" (FG06). Many Middle Eastern participants reported emotional distress and self-censoring of their cultural heritage (such as refraining from identifying as Arab or wearing cultural garments like the keffiyeh) (FG05).

Staff and students from both groups described a lack of sympathy within the universities for distress and trauma. A Jewish student recounted: "[A friend's] family [had been] murdered. The day after, someone celebrating" (FG53). While the trauma of losing family in Gaza was compounded by an institutional failure to provide support. Palestinian students reported that before any extension or deferral would be considered, they were required to produce official death certificates, and in some cases, translate them. One staff member detailed this callous process: "When the student brought that certificate, they asked her to translate it […] they wouldn't even like delay [their] exam" (Middle Eastern staff member, FG09). Other Middle Eastern staff members similarly shared: "We're sitting there with students with 20 members of their family dead. We're not trained for this as staff. We have no training for this. It's not our role" (FG09).

Lateral violence was experienced by Jewish participants

Jewish participants described how the polarisation of views about the Middle Eastern conflict has intensified, to a point where some experience interactions with other Jewish students and staff as antisemitism. Some Jewish staff and students expressed disquiet about their views being assumed: "It rests on this assumption that we have to think and act and behave as a monolith. I think that's deeply troubling" (Jewish staff member, FG43).

Several expressed distress that they were allowed no nuance of view. Not only non-Jewish university community members but also other Jewish colleagues would express intolerance if they tried to articulate support for Israel and distress at the bombing of Gaza or the treatment of Palestinians more generally. One Jewish staff member, a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, recounted interrupting and criticising Jewish students who were provoking pro-Palestine protestors. After the staff member identified himself as Jewish, one student called him a "Kapo" and stated, "they'd slit your throat too if they had a chance" (FG43). Within the Jewish community, Kapo is a highly charged term, referring to Jewish collaborators with Nazis in concentration camps. The staff member retelling this extremely upsetting story was not suggesting that even his assailants were serious in their slander of Palestinian or pro-Palestinian protestors. The point of the story was the escalation of hostility to a particularly hateful accusation to make of the descendants of Holocaust survivors, by other Jews.

There were also experiences by Middle Eastern, Arab and Palestinian students and staff participants that were more extreme and caused extreme fear

Middle Eastern participants reported repeated experiences of surveillance, feeling intimidated by campus security. When seeking counselling support for accumulated trauma, the service sought the presence of security staff, in case the student was a threat to counsellors (FG17). There was a sense among several Middle Eastern students and staff that university security officers were taking a partisan view, attempting to intimidate, especially Palestinian, students. Some reported that university security was "not only taking IDs" and "following people" but also "going through social media" to identify [Pro-Palestinian] students." (Middle Eastern student, facilitator's notes). Another participant said they were fearful because "even if you sign a petition, they are collecting the names of the people that sign the petitions. And that's led me to go. 'Oh, my gosh! What risk am I taking by signing a petition? We live in Australia'" (Middle Eastern staff member, FG32).

The impact of these specific experiences of Middle Eastern Arab and Palestinian participants was further exacerbated by insecurity about visa status experienced by some. Additionally, the Universities Australia statement on antisemitism both exacerbated feelings of vulnerability and a devaluing of that vulnerability by their universities.

The precariousness of visa status was a significant factor for participants, especially those from the Middle East and Palestine, who felt their right to political expression was constrained by the risk of professional or legal retaliation. This fear forced many into silence to safeguard their future, as a Middle Eastern staff member explained: "We have to keep our record clean […] avoid any type of […] incidents to make sure that everything's going to be okay […] by default, the situation is very difficult for us. Imagine if you have something in your record. It's going to be impossible to get anything" (FG32).

Students also echoed similar concerns with speaking out, believing speaking out either on their treatment or on the political issues would be immediately interpreted as unacceptable and lead to serious consequences. "I'm on a student visa. I don't want to get deported. My family are spending so much on my education" (Middle Eastern student, WS030).

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in acknowledging and addressing racism and discrimination

2.1 Staff and students from all the groups complain that universities are not clear in their position on racism and discrimination, leading to feelings of being delegitimised

Notwithstanding universities' significant investment in consulting and attempts to make clear statements and standards related to racism and discrimination on their campuses, these efforts fell flat for many focus group members. A Jewish academic stated, "I think it's the role of universities to talk about all forms of racism […] not just make token statements" (FG010). Many see current messaging as shallow and universities as unwilling to confront uncomfortable realities.

An Asian student reflected, "None of the university leadership has spoken against anything about it […] now we are giving a signal that it's okay to say this out loud […] I can do what I want, because the leadership is doing what they want" (FG33). For many, this silence set a permissive tone, signalling that racism can be tolerated or that leadership valued reputational protection over real accountability. This left them feeling invisible, unsupported, and unsafe.

Participants described a pattern of institutional avoidance, where they observed university executives refusing to open dialogue, making students and staff feel their concerns were being delegitimised. An Indigenous student recounted how their repeated requests for an in-person meeting were ignored: "I asked for a meeting a few times to discuss the issues in person and each time I wouldn't get an invite to bring it up […]" (WS068).

Similarly, a Middle Eastern staff member described how the university would not formally meet with Palestinian students but instead used "back channels to ask us if we can meet the Palestinian students and arrange it on the quiet […] Provide them with therapy […] but on the quiet" (FG09). "The darker your shade, the shallower your rights will be" (FG28).

The Universities Australia statement on antisemitism was intended to require that criticism of Israel is not antisemitic, but had negative impacts on staff and students participating in focus groups

The public debate over University Australia's adoption of its statement on antisemitism had important repercussions for students and staff. While the statement was supported and welcomed by some Jewish staff and students, it was described as damaging by members of both Jewish and Middle Eastern staff and students.

The statement's focus on antisemitism caused distress for Middle Eastern and Muslim staff and students. They expressed that, by addressing one form of racism while omitting anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab, or Anti-Muslim behaviour, the statement made

them feel their distress over the conflict was being devalued. It also made these staff and students worry they would be punished for voicing their own experiences or their views on the actions of the Israeli Government. As one Palestinian student stated, it left them "terrified to speak out" and forced to constantly "monitor your language, monitor your tone because of your ethnicity" (FG28). In an environment where universities are all looking to save money, some Middle Eastern academics voiced concerns that the statement provided permission or even support to reduce funding for Middle Eastern or Islamic studies courses and research programs.

Jewish participants were split on the question of the statement, but many talked about the behaviour at public debates (usually they specified not by Middle Eastern or Muslim people) being uncivil, confronting and damaging. Others were concerned that the specificity of the statement would exacerbate the tendency to assume all Jewish staff and students were only concerned about antisemitism and did not care about what was happening to Palestinian and other Middle Eastern students. A Jewish academic stated that, "I believe that both Palestinians and Israelis deserve peace, dignity and their own state […] I am deeply concerned that I could be targeted as a Jew on campus" (WS015).

Co-design partners that we consulted prior to the focus groups also cited the various escalation points around the Middle East and the failure to manage this issue as a reason members of groups other than Jewish, Middle Eastern and Muslim did not participate. Co-design partners told us that members of other groups have expressed to them that the Middle East issues "occupied all the space", leading others to be more private about their own issues.

2.2 Many participants felt that universities have inadequate engagement with diverse communities, leading to an over-reliance on student clubs to support victims of racism

Cultural clubs and collectives continued to do the heavy lifting in supporting students from culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds, often stepping in to fill the gaps left by the institution. This responsibility frequently fell on already overburdened equity units, cultural student associations, or individual staff members with first-hand experience. Pasifika student participants stressed that this cultural load is particularly acute. "The university expects us to carry the cultural load and responsibility for Pacific issues and students. There was a Māori student who wanted to graduate with their cultural cloak, and they sent the student to us. We don't have the authority to speak about these things" (FG40). In the absence of appropriate institutional structures, Pasifika students often felt compelled to support their peers directly. When asked why they continued to shoulder this additional labour despite the lack of support, they responded simply: "If not us, then who?" (FG40).

Participants from other groups also expressed a broader frustration with universities over-relying on established communities to take on responsibilities in identifying problems and proposing solutions. One Jewish student reflected, "The university is

taking advantage of how organised we are as a community; they put the burden on us to do the heavy lifting, research. Whereas in other instances, they investigate, now they ask us how to fix things" (FG53).

One First Nations student reported that she had applied for nine days of bereavement leave when she lost her grandmother who had raised her. While this leave was approved, when she returned to her studies, she was not afforded permission to catch up by using the digital recordings and materials, even though this is set out in policy. She recounted that she was subjected to a five-week process of re-assessment of her enrolment. Then, when her cousin committed suicide and her best friend died, the university staff delayed dealing with her case. She caught up but her reports of the treatment she received from non-Indigenous staff indicated that she was dismissed as not worth the effort (Indigenous student, FG27).

Even when universities engaged with students, many have shared that the process often feels symbolic rather than meaningful. As a Jewish staff member suggested, universities should "consult more carefully and systematically with […] communities […] not only token, selected staff […] Provide opportunities for respectful dialogue rather than one-sided indoctrination" (Jewish staff, WS017).

2.3 Participants failed to see people like themselves in senior roles and called out a lack of diversity among decision makers

Many believed that leadership lacks the representation and cultural understanding needed to drive real change. As one Asian staff member put it, "We have no representation in senior management […] all senior management is going to look white, without background in multiculturalism" (FG47), highlighting the disconnect between those shaping university responses and those experiencing racism on the ground. Another academic also observed the lack of data to understand diversity: "We need some hard quantitative data about the people of colour there […] the non-English speaking people" (Asian staff member, FG51).

This lack of representation was also described as affecting how policies are developed and applied. As one Indigenous academic explained, "It becomes institutional racism when they start to say our policies can't recognise [racism] […] and then the people who investigated [the racism incident], none of them identified as First Nations" (FG03).

2.4 Academic freedom and free speech are selectively applied as universities defend harmful rhetoric while marginalised voices face censorship, scrutiny and silence

Staff and students from a range of backgrounds shared experiences where racist or discriminatory comments were dismissed or defended by universities under the banner of free speech. One Indigenous academic recounted how a student had declared that "the department shouldn't be called Aboriginal Studies [...] it should be

called Australian Studies, because it's discriminating against white Australians." The academic explained that the incident began with an interpersonal attack via email but escalated to a public setting "in front of an audience." When they officially reported the racism, the university reframed it as a "freedom of speech situation." As the academic described, "Because she had freedom of speech, she doubled down," and the institution backed the student rather than the staff member who was targeted. Despite having taken formal steps to report the harm, the academic was left without support, while the student continued to be defended by the institution in the name of academic freedom (FG03).

Many Jewish and Middle Eastern participants also accused universities of using free speech and academic freedom as a cover for not calling out offensive statements and suppressing critical comments. Jewish students reported a classroom environment where antisemitic tropes could be expressed without challenge, sometimes by academics themselves. One student described a lecturer who said: "The Holocaust shouldn't be called a genocide because its victims were white" (FG06).

On the other hand, participants also reported that university policies and practices actively constrained their ability to express political views, grieve publicly, or organise protests. One student described "so many policies […] this year that don't allow protests [and] don't allow talks in classes that are not related to the unit" (Middle Eastern student, FG17). "You know whether there is academic freedom. You frighten people into thinking that there isn't. The frightening of people undermines the academic freedom, especially people that have come from, you know, minority backgrounds, people that have […] we've all been generally like lived on, and our parents lived under kind of persecution" (FG32).

Both groups felt failed by a lack of clarity in university responses and a failure to distinguish clearly between important latitude for expression of strongly held views and ways in which this would be regarded as appropriate.

Participants from Middle Eastern and Muslim backgrounds described how fear, self-censorship, and targeted scrutiny have eroded their trust in the university's commitment to academic freedom. "I don't speak up. I don't say anything. I've never, you know, publicly identified in my academic career as being Middle Eastern in any way, because I am afraid of the impacts of that. I'm very cautious about what I publicly share of my views on any political things to do with people from the Middle East […] I'm frightened of what repercussions that would have for me and my work, which is a really interesting position to be in […] a sector that's supposed to prioritise intellectual freedom" (Middle Eastern staff member, FG32). As another Middle Eastern staff member explained, "There might be academic freedom in theory […] but how it plays out [in] practice could be something entirely different" (FG32).

2.5 These issues are compounded by other systemic challenges faced by those with intersectional identities, such as people with a disability and LGBTQIA+ people

Experiences of LGBTQIA+ people and racism in universities

Students described how experiences of racism and marginalisation were compounded for LGBTQIA+ individuals who are negatively racialised. One participant recalled an incident on campus when a tutor dismissed them and did not believe they were Indigenous and LGBTQIA+. This incident led to "continued ongoing targeting and harassment from staff in my faculty" (FG23). They noted that the only support they received came from "other visibly LGBT, non-white people," reflecting the isolating dynamic of "a very stark us versus them" culture on campus.

As they explained, "It adds a whole new layer of confusion to people who are already confused about someone being not white, because cultures and communities have different ways they deal with gender and sexuality" (FG23). Several noted that LGBTQIA+ clubs and formal inclusion initiatives often failed to reflect the communities' diversity, tending to be dominated by white students and lacking understanding of the compounded discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ people of colour. These reflections illustrate how institutional responses often fail to account for the complex, intersectional ways that race, gender and sexuality shape exclusion.

Experiences of people with disability and racism in universities

Students with disabilities recalled both subtle and overt forms of exclusion. In one elective outside the disability field, two visually impaired students were pre-emptively placed in a group together under the assumption that "it is less likely that you will find more people working with you". This denied them the chance to collaborate with others: "It's something like an exclusion […] we were not giving the opportunity to choose, to be working with other people without disabilities" (FG38).

Participants highlighted the importance of university support services that understand their needs, from both their disability and ethnic or cultural perspectives. In a focus group with students enrolled in a disability-specific degree, they described positive experiences with disability services, including the timely provision of accessible materials, counselling, and academic adjustments. However, they stressed that inclusivity was inconsistent. Disability awareness was stronger in specialist programs, but staff in other faculties often lacked training to engage respectfully and inclusively with students with disability (FG38).

For some, relying on support for multiple forms of disadvantage often risked being perceived as overreaching or testing the patience of staff and peers. An Aboriginal student shared his story, "I was late diagnosed with autism […] So there are supports for students with disabilities, but […] I have to explain what autism is, and for me what it is like […] like explicit instructions, or things like this […] particularly around

due dates, and […] that's what I'm working out. What do I choose? What do I want support with, or do I just say everything?" (FG45).

Experiences of women and racism in universities

Women students described being particularly targeted for harassment and hostility on campus, highlighting how gender compounds their experiences of exclusion. One participant reflected, "That became very clear to me is that as women, we seem to be more of a target" (FG24), pointing out that women often face heightened risk in university settings.

Gendered norms are particularly prominent for some, creating distinct forms of marginalisation that differ from those experienced by men in the same community. A staff member stated: "Being both Muslim and a woman of colour, it feels like I have double the reason to stay quiet" (facilitator's notes). This intersectional discrimination could also precipitate lateral discrimination within communities. One Asian student described discrimination from other Asians, "Unpleasant acts from in the community itself […] Even if you come from the same background, there's a lot of layers to it" (FG013). Muslim women also had experiences of cultural and gender-based exclusion within their communities because their "identity didn't match dominant expectations of how a 'Muslim woman' should behave" (Muslim student, WS024).

Some participants described experiences of sexualised racism. One African participant shared hearing from a lecturer: "Your body is seducing myself and other boys in this classroom because you have a big bottom and wide hips. Why are you even doing this course? Why don't you do simple courses that people from your region do? Next time don't enrol – you are causing a distraction" (WS004). This account is a strong example of the meaning of intersectionality. Both this participant's race and gender were necessary components of the offensive remarks. It is also exemplary of the extremely offensive repetition of long standing tropes of the treatment of Black women in racist settings.

Women described facing hostility on campus even during peaceful, community-oriented activities. One student recalled a fundraising event, stating, "There was a bake sale on the University campus […] all organised by women of different schools, different courses, different backgrounds. And there was a group of men who came, and they were very aggressive […] The security of the campus […] simply asked the women to pack up. And we couldn't sell, and we couldn't connect with the community on campus, really" (FG24). This gendered pattern of hostility was also evident during protests and encampments, where harassment was disproportionately directed at women. As one participant observed, "People […] came to shout and abuse the women […] because somehow it made them feel more empowered" (FG24), illustrating how sexism made women a particular target for intimidation and silencing.

Participants who reported these instances of sexist treatment also have a strong view that it was easier for the perpetrators to get away with, because they were women

also able to be racially stereotyped. They named these as examples of sexism and racism.

Some participants also did not have women, let alone women from diverse backgrounds, in senior academic positions in their disciplines, which limited their confidence to raise issues impacting them as minority women. One student explained, "it starts with having more visibility of women that are wanting to make change" (FG24).

Even in disciplines with more women on staff, there was a sense for the women in focus groups that this did not necessarily make them safe. One participant captured the contradiction between women's visibility on campus and their continued marginalisation. She stated, "Women are not even a minority, and we are oppressed" (FG24), highlighting how gender hierarchies persist even in contexts where women are numerically present, dynamics that limit women's safety, influence, and voice within university spaces.

3. Policies and systems to report, deter and address racism and discrimination are inadequate

3.1 Staff and students lacked trust in university reporting systems, describing them as unclear, overly bureaucratic, unsafe and protecting institutional interests

Many students and staff perceived university complaint processes as ineffective and opaque, reinforcing a culture of inaction. Complaints processes were also described as bureaucratic and designed to protect the institution, not the complainant. One staff member remarked, "[reporting mechanism] is there to protect the higher-ups. This is well known in higher education" (Muslim staff member, FG37). An Indigenous academic reported that, "the university waited for over 12 months to respond and then sent me a document that dismissed all of my complaints because 'it had passed the 12 months' and therefore my complaints were no longer valid […] Those complaints are still occurring today and not one of the issues were ever investigated or responded to" (WS031).

Participants also noted that racism was frequently dismissed as a misunderstanding, poor communication, or isolated conflict rather than a structural problem requiring institutional accountability. An international student shared that, "I complain […] But my unit coordinator doesn't trust me [and] thinks it's my language [that's causing the] misunderstanding" (FG08). This is echoed by other groups, for instance, an African student shared that "often times my claims have been questioned or the offences have been downplayed to a minor misunderstanding by the administration" (African student, WS115). Jewish students in one focus group (FG06) said that a

Jewish student would not go to any of the university services and say, 'I feel unsafe' because nothing will happen. Numerous staff and students reported that they had lost faith in their university's reporting processes and were reluctant to make further complaints.

Participants also highlighted a lack of racial literacy among many university leaders and complaints-handling staff, particularly those who were not from culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds. This resulted in a lack of cultural safety and inclusiveness in universities' reporting processes. One academic underscored the exclusion of Indigenous perspectives, stating, "When Indigenous people report racism, Indigenous people should be part of the internal investigation team" (Indigenous, WS001). Jewish staff members in a focus group stated that there is no clear policy pathway for staff to raise concerns about antisemitism. "There is no useful mechanism within the university - the university is a racist institution and it fosters and rewards people who further that racism. Whenever something is offered, I've found my complaints to be poorly and/or harmfully handled." (WS014).

Cultural and psychological safety were also compromised for many participants throughout the complaint processes. As one Palestinian staff member shared, "I've been extremely distressed about that [situation] and [the senior leader] didn't even give me space to validate my concerns, that I am grieving" (FG28).

There was a commonly shared concern that reporting racism carries significant personal and professional risk, particularly in the absence of meaningful institutional support. As a Muslim academic explained, "I have not reported it because of potential ostracisation and fear of making 'enemies' in the workplace" (WS021). One written submission stated, "My career over a period of 25+ years has been impacted" (Asian staff member, WS009), underscoring the long-term consequences some staff have faced for speaking up. A further concern was the difficulty of reporting without exposure. As one Asian staff member put it, "Problem is, you can't actually anonymise yourself […] it's a complete myth […] there has to be another mechanism to be able to lodge complaints without compromising your safety, security, and job security" (FG14).

For students, the fear of reporting racism was closely tied to the need to maintain essential academic relationships. One Indigenous student explained, "You don't really want to complain about things that happen, because you know that relationships are incredibly important as a researcher. And maybe you need that relationship with that person, even though they're racist" (FG56). These fears were particularly acute among Higher Degree by Research students, who described navigating entrenched power imbalances. As one African student reflected, "Really, if it were me as a supervisor, I think I would do everything to protect my students" (FG31).

3.2 Support services are described as lacking cultural awareness and practical guidance for navigating racism complaints

Support structures available to students and staff were frequently described as generalist, with limited racial literacy or expertise in responding to racism-related harm. A Middle Eastern staff member described: "I spent at least 30 minutes describing Palestine to the professional, the professional was not interested in knowing what I was going through or anything that I was feeling or anything that's related to Palestine. They were always trying to direct the conversation towards my professional development" (FG09).

Some participants also commented on the absence of early intervention or navigation support for individuals beginning the complaints process. Many described feeling isolated and unclear about where to seek guidance or what to expect from the process. This lack of clarity was particularly evident among international students: "I am not sure where I should contact" (WS018); "I don't feel comfortable doing it and don't know where exactly I should be turning to" (WS079); and "I don't always know where or how to report racism […] even if I do, I worry it won't be taken seriously, or worse, it'll affect how my lecturers or peers treat me later" (WS106).

3.3 Institutional responses to violence and safety concerns are often perceived to reflect denial, deflection, or victim-blaming

Responses to violent incidents were described as dismissive, with security staff at times refusing to record or escalate complaints. One Palestinian student shared, "On one occasion, while carrying my Tatreez bag on campus, I was assaulted [...] When I reported this incident to campus security, [the security staff] asked me whether I said anything to provoke the person. Right before he walked away, he said 'there aren't any cameras – I can't do anything about it'" (WS030). This response not only deflected responsibility but also implied that the victim may have been to blame.

Middle Eastern staff and students cited instances of responses to complaints or reports of aggression or even violence to their community being met with coded or explicit requests for individuals to hide their identity. One Middle Eastern staff member recalled, "The manager refused to accept that Anti-Palestinian racism exists at the University" (FG09). It should be stressed that Middle Eastern participants in our focus groups emphasised the importance of specifying the specific racism experienced by Palestinian and Middle Eastern Arab people. Several made the point that generalised bias and discrimination toward Muslim and Middle Eastern people is real and remains prevalent, but that specific hostility to Arab and Palestinian people is a phenomenon that now needs to be named and is not understood by universities.

One Indigenous student captured the deep institutional disbelief they encountered when reporting an incident of racism: "I was told, when I was making the complaint, that that couldn't have happened, because the Subject Coordinator trusts her staff and the people she chooses, and if it had happened, it would have been reported[...]

From the get-go, it was very obvious that even if it had happened or hadn't happened, the students weren't going to be believed" (FG27).

Other staff and students described feeling abandoned even in the face of clear threats. One Jewish staff member wrote, "There was video evidence, and the threat was written on the back of a petition signatures page from the student group. We were told there was nothing to be done, and nothing ever did happen" (WS114). Fear of retaliation and mistrust of reporting processes were also widespread. One Middle Eastern student who was a victim of a physical and sexual assault explained, "The university continues to intimidate people through their processes and policies. I worry that if I officially report the incident, they'll find a way to twist it to make it seem like I was the one who provoked him. So, listening to my parents, I put my head down and carry on like nothing happened" (WS030).

4. Universities fail to meaningfully and effectively promote cultural safety and inclusion

4.1 Across all groups, participants acknowledged instances of constructive leadership, yet there are still barriers to getting traction or creating positive changes

This was felt strongly, particularly amongst Indigenous participants. For example, the advocacy of a Director of an Indigenous student centre was commended for ensuring students' concerns were taken seriously (Indigenous student, FG49). Similarly, a staff member spoke positively about their institution's senior Indigenous leader, noting: "we've got [name of DVC-I] who's very vocal out and very much about accelerated pathway, you know, like all those things that could possibly be seen to be unfair advantage if that makes sense […] and I mean he's advocating for not only the Indigenous, but also the homosexual and or LGBT […] so I think we're kind of lucky" (Indigenous staff member, FG39).

In addition, relationships with individual tutors, lecturers, and administrators were frequently highlighted as essential sources of safety and validation. One Asian international student recalled how the teaching staff's open conversation at the beginning of the term made a difference to the classroom environment: "He did do a small presentation, tried to explain things in a really reasonable way [...] from basic theories to context [...] He reminded people that […] domestic students don't realise their privilege […] international students spend ten times more time just figuring out […] really simple things [...] contributed to the best group work experience I've ever had in that class" (FG08). One Indigenous student also echoed the experience, emphasising the importance of positive, respectful and reciprocal relationships between staff and students: "[…] student recruitment portfolio. The person before didn't care, didn't have the awareness. The person now is good, does the right things,

he acknowledges he's not First Nations, always asks us when we have suggestions" (FG49).

However, while university leadership often claimed to prioritise inclusion, many students and staff felt their first-hand experiences contradicted these institutional narratives

Participants from various backgrounds described a significant gap between the university's stated commitment to inclusion and their first-hand experiences of being unsupported and devalued. An African student shared, "as a person of colour, when you're trying to be yourself, you get discriminated […] so you try to blend in" (FG52). A Middle Eastern staff member also reflected, regarding an exhibition that was specifically to showcase artwork from Muslim and Middle Eastern artists, "My [university] cancelled the Arts Exhibition […] without any consultation, without giving any clear reason. […] It just showed me what the University considers the worth of Middle Eastern people to be […] and their voices, and I was just shocked" (FG32).

When discussions did occur, students of colour often found themselves being told to be quiet when expressing discomfort. This was discussed by Muslim staff members in a focus group, including feeling they should not talk about Islamophobia" (FG37). Others were being pressured to represent their communities during classroom debates, taking an unfair load of responsibility. As one Indigenous student suggested, "take on the responsibility in being an educator. You need to learn to call shit out. If there's stuff wrong in the class, you take on responsibility to educate others. It should not be left to the kids (students) to decide the consequences" (FG49).

Several students described being subject to deficit-based assumptions about their academic capabilities. Common examples included staff perceiving Asian students as less capable in critical thinking, essay writing or language ability. As participants shared, "there is a process of […] stigmatisation of international students" (Asian student tutor, FG04), or "they assumed I […] needed to learn English due to my skin colour" (Asian student, WS122).

In addition, others experienced a rejection or absence of diverse knowledges, frameworks and teaching materials in curricula

Participants described university curricula as predominantly Eurocentric. While Indigenous knowledges and Global South scholarship were seen as marginalised or supplementary, academic gatekeeping practices were identified as a key barrier to curricular change. One student recalled, "I wanted to add […] my personal perspective […] from like an African […] but quite often when I wanted to add my thoughts […] not just by one lecturer, but by multiple ones, have been discredited […] Lecturers stop me right there and say […] we are talking from an Australian context, a local context […] but the topic itself [was] a global topic" (African student, FG31).

Some participants reported that their ways of knowing were either excluded or treated as supplementary. As one participant shared, "One particular academic told me that I

couldn’t use Indigenous knowledges or standpoint in my PhD because there was no such thing as them, and I had to use Western methodologies” (Indigenous student, FG03).

Even when diverse content was included, it was often seen as tokenistic and superficial, rather than being embedded across curricula. Several participants commented that non-Western lecturers were only invited to speak on identity-based or symbolic topics, as one Indigenous academic recalled, “It’s the unconscious bias that suggests that I’m not capable […] Not only was I not given opportunities to work within data, within scientific […] It was almost, if I can’t do weaving and language, then I don’t exist in the faculty. So, [I’m] being pulled in for week 8, the Indigenous week only” (FG03).

Indigenous students reported mixed experiences with the dedicated Indigenous support centres, which often have limited power to address complex issues within the institution

Many Indigenous students appreciated having a dedicated space or team that understood their cultural context, particularly when those were well-funded and student-centred. As one Indigenous student described it, “Strong support network […] close-knit community through Indigenous students” (FG49). In contrast, another Indigenous student expressed a lack of confidence in the Indigenous support staff: “Sometimes these positions that are put there to support us aren't even supporting us. They're there to tick a box” (FG27).

Participants also noticed that Indigenous student units were often under-resourced or limited to cultural or social support functions and were not empowered to respond to or escalate complaints of racism. As one student put it, “The [Indigenous student centre] handles it, but they [other university staff] don’t take the [centre] seriously” (FG49).

The Indigenous staff member at the university similarly dismissed this Aboriginal student and failed to support her. (FG27). The student further reported that “even the Indigenous [support] person told me […] to go back and talk to your family and reach out to your community.” The student responded: “I'm here. You're the only Black person I know in this town. You're meant to be my community at this university. I don't need you to remind me to go talk to my family. I'm not stupid […] there should be a policy around Indigenous student leave [for] Sorry Business […] around that cultural stuff, and it should be respected and protected […] I should have had access to student reps, Indigenous ones who actually know what they're doing and supported [me]”.

This Indigenous student recommended that there be more respect for the needs of bereaved students to attend to ‘sorry business,’ and have adequate compassionate leave allowances respected and supported. This is necessary as many Indigenous students come from communities with high mortality rates. Indigenous support

centres should have the authority to play a greater role in advocating for the cultural needs of Indigenous students, especially in relation to bereavement.

Some participants shared that safe spaces are important, but noted risks and limitations

The issue of culturally specific safe spaces for support or cultural connection was raised by participants, though not as prominently as might have been expected. Perspectives were mixed. Some students expressed strong appreciation for student centres, describing them as spaces where they could feel safe and supported.

However, others highlighted complexities: these spaces were sometimes seen as potential targets for racism or harassment, or as sites of tension due to intra-community differences. As a Jewish student explained, "Almost every university gives us a safe room, but what is it really doing? It gives us more fear; safe room means natural threat they are trying to protect us from" (FG53). One participant noted that queer spaces were not always safe for people of colour. This suggests that while culturally specific spaces can offer meaningful support, they are not a panacea and may also reflect broader structural and social challenges within university environments.

4.2 Staff and students from all groups criticised generic cultural awareness training as token, optional and 'window dressing'

Participants across focus groups consistently described racism training in universities as absent. Where training did exist, it was seen as inefficient, rarely tailored to address the systemic and interpersonal realities of racism in higher education. As participants shared, "online cultural competency training […] people just skip through to the end and don't do anything with it […] They're so useless. It's just a click through. You can just look up the answers on the Internet. It makes no f*** change" (Indigenous staff member, FG03). Another reflected on the participants of such sessions, "People who need to attend cultural training would never show up. And people who keep attending […] would be people who have awareness over the issue, who want to change the system, and we keep reinforcing each other. No, we need to change it" (Asian staff member, FG21).

As a result, these sessions were often seen as superficial and performative. This raised concerns about the training's lack of depth, which failed to address real-life scenarios and was seen more as procedural hurdles than genuine learning opportunities. Many, therefore, emphasised the need to make training more efficient. For example, going beyond online modules to set up in-person, facilitated workshops, especially for senior leaders. These were said to need to include real examples from campus life to "understand what everyday racism can look like and how you can make a difference" (Muslim staff member, WS076). The content was also suggested to "go beyond introductory sessions", such as delving into "systemic racism, microaggressions, cultural humility, intersectionality, and the history and ongoing

impacts of colonialism, particularly in the local context" (Indigenous staff member, WS007).

Focus group participants also distinguished between cultural safety and anti-racism, arguing that the former is often substituted for the latter. One participant pointed out, "There needs to be a differentiation between cultural safety training and anti-racism training […] and these things need to be mandatory" (Indigenous, FG27). Without this clarity, universities were seen as avoiding uncomfortable truths in favour of safer, more palatable messaging.

4.3 Staff and students from all groups expressed a desire for the creation of respectful spaces for discussions on contemporary, difficult issues

Teaching staff seemed ill-equipped to manage discussions about race, racism and discrimination in the classroom, creating unsafe spaces

Students across focus groups described classroom conversations about race and discrimination as poorly handled, if not entirely avoided. In many cases, teaching staff were seen as unprepared or unwilling to facilitate meaningful dialogue when these topics arose. Several participants recounted moments when staff ignored, changed the subject, or failed to intervene in racist comments. One student shared, "What is most disturbing is not only the racism I personally experienced, but the lecturer's complete failure to acknowledge, support, or empathise with the Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian students in the room. While I was speaking about a serious racist attack, the classroom responded with laughter. The environment became threatening" (Middle East Muslim student, WS112). Another student recalled similar stories in class, "those don't know, keep on using slurs […] my tutor didn't say anything, didn't cut off […] Because she didn't call out, it happened twice again" (Indigenous student, FG49).

Staff who attempted to address racism in the classroom described receiving little to no institutional support. Some reported being undermined by colleagues or managers or facing complaints from students when taking an explicitly anti-racist stance or simply trying to keep the discourse in class civil. For example, one Jewish student noted in a focus group the lack of support from their Department for a lecturer who had tried, in a very even-handed way, to ensure that political announcements made in class were done so in a way that was not offensive to other students (FG06).

This was associated with the lack of training for staff and students in terms of language and cultural diversity. More than this, though, it was seen as a management flaw, failing to support colleagues who were trying to enact the university's policies. Most universities have policies setting standards for both student and staff behaviour to create culturally safe learning environments. These did not come up in focus group discussions and appear to have no traction for staff responsibilities, in support for staff trying to enforce behavioural standards required by those policies or in implicit

requirements for the responses of unit coordinators and heads of department faced with managing toxic classroom behaviour.

Participants stressed the need for universities to embed cross-cultural skills and competence required within teaching standards and staff training, not just awareness or sensitivity. "We learn about cultural sensitivity in many course, teachers should use the techniques they teach" (Asian student, FG44). Many argued that genuine cultural responsiveness should be recognised as a core teaching capability. Student participants in focus groups were very critical that more senior colleagues did not support teachers trying to apply the lessons of cross-cultural responsibility. Extant university policies are a neglected lever to require improved responses from teaching staff and their superiors.

4.4 Staff and students from all groups sought institutionalised support for specific cultural obligations

For Indigenous people, recognition of cultural obligations being matched by positive support

Indigenous students consistently described the emotional and academic toll of navigating university systems that failed to recognise or accommodate their cultural obligations, particularly in relation to sorry business. Despite the deep significance of these practices in Indigenous communities, students shared how they were penalised or guilted for taking time to fulfil these responsibilities. One student recounted being criticised by their supervisor, "My nan at the time was dying of cancer, and so I needed to […] go back to Country […] Ended up needing to take an extra week off work because she passed away […] had some sorry business and had to go through all that. The supervisor […] called me to let me know that she had never experienced somebody who had to take so much time off work for something of this nature, and how disappointed she was in me" (FG55).

Another student recalled being told, "You must admit, this is a big ask," when taking nine days of bereavement leave, adding, "There should be a policy around Indigenous student leave for sorry business […] It should be respected and protected" (FG27). Others described how this lack of support created long-term harm. "I really regret it. I wish I hadn't taken the leave. I should have just turned up on placement, and I should have just been crying in the hospital, because this has just put me through so much stress" (FG27).

Some students recommended that Indigenous support staff should be trained to support students with complex trauma and bereavement issues and be required to provide support to students. They also felt that Indigenous support staff should be stronger advocates for their cultural needs, such as bereavement leave and the cultural obligations associated with 'Sorry Business' (FG27).

Both Jewish and Muslim staff and students expressed a desire for recognition and support for holy days and feeling safe to wear clothing that identified their religious identity

Participants reported a lack of visibility and practical accommodation for religious obligations. A Muslim staff member critiqued the systemic lack of recognition as, "You don't have the capacity to take cultural leave, you have to use your own leave […] It is an exclusion. Systematically. […] You don't do that for Christmas […] It's just it's systematically different for other groups, for racial groups and religious groups" (FG37).

For Muslim women in particular, the intersection of gender, religion and race compounded the impact, as discussed previously in the report. Multiple Muslim women described feeling unsafe and hyper-visible when wearing the hijab on campus: "I was not confident enough to wear [a hijab] here […] I could take it off […] but it's part of my identity. That's why I don't want to take it off" (Muslim student, FG42). A Jewish student similarly noted: "I didn't wear a Star of David necklace on campus for over a year, because I just didn't want to be openly identified as a Jewish student" (FG06). These experiences collectively indicated the need for institutional policies that not only acknowledge but also actively accommodate and protect cultural and religious identity.

Reflecting a higher aspiration for universities than freedom from bullying behaviour, students and staff said that, in an ideal world, they would like safe and respectful spaces to explore challenging issues

Many students saw value in connection and mutual understanding, a value some named as implicit in the notion of a university's role in society. A Jewish student captured this aspiration clearly: "I would love to see support for dialogue [...] I feel if people just understood a little bit more […] some sort of mediated conversation would be amazing [...] cultural exchange […] we would, like, eat together and have a conversation […] I think this connection between Jewish and Muslim and Palestinian students is really important" (FG06).

One student with a dual identity spoke to the pressure they face, explaining: "As an Arab, I could choose invisibility - though I've never wanted to hide that part of myself or even my Jewishness. [I am] seeking an environment where I can exist without my dual identity becoming a source of conflict or judgment" (WS044).

However, despite these aspirations, no group was optimistic about the likelihood of such spaces being created or supported within their universities. As one Jewish student put it: "[universities are …] not creating any opportunities for any kind of meaningful dialogue" (FG01).

Conclusions

The brief for this piece of work was to contribute qualitative data and analysis as one of a number of inputs to a report the Commission is preparing for Government. This context is important. Our most significant contribution is in presenting the courageous and generous input of students and staff from religious, ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds. They shared often extremely painful experiences of racist and discriminatory behaviour they have suffered, and also their experience of often inadequate, even re-traumatising, responses from their universities. We used the thematic analysis to analyse these experience narratives and presented the experiences reported against four broad findings, presented in the four preceding chapters. A consolidated summary of these findings is the first Appendix to this report, following this section.

In this final section, we offer some thoughts on ways the university sector and the Commission might approach reform. To do this, we need to focus both on where the identified problems lie and on levers to make change. The imperative here is to get beyond broad statements of intent on the one part and outrage on the other.

There are two sets of contextual statements that frame these suggested directions.

Within the scope of our commission and method, we are in no position to comment on macro or geopolitical issues or draw conclusions about the prevalence of racism on university campuses. Neither is within scope. Our scope and method were about listening to and analysing the first-hand experience of individuals who chose to participate in our process. This is a good basis for considering where the system is failing those students and staff.

We are in no position to conclude whether the university staff and students we engaged with are representative of the general staff and student bodies, even from the same religious, ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds. Prima facie, we would expect not. They sought to participate in a process explicitly about experiences of racism and discrimination, and were people prepared to share such experiences. This was an enquiry into the experiences of a non-representative group, one that matters greatly because they are staff and students the university systems are failing.

Not every staff member and student, including those from religious, ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds, have these experiences. Some of the participants in our process also made the point that, notwithstanding the bad experiences they described on campus, those campuses are still not as bad as the "world outside." The quantitative study being undertaken for the Commission should be better placed to comment on prevalence.

Second, universities are big and complex institutions. Our team has deep expertise in universities. Members of our team come from, have worked with, or played senior roles in universities and in university policy. Several of us have done previous analyses of other challenging issues universities have faced, including regarding the

underpayment of junior and casual academic staff and the impact of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Individuals who generously contributed to our focus group study often name system failure, leadership neglect and institutional hostility in general terms when expressing their experience of being failed by universities. Those are powerful statements of serious moral value that are important for the university sector and its leaders to hear. Our team was shocked at some of what we heard, even taking account of the kind of work we do with marginalised communities.

The reform task needed to ensure that universities can successfully implement meaningful changes needs to go beyond this. Universities are increasingly complex organisations that are also highly decentralised. This paradox stems from their history and core values regarding academic freedom and independence from the state and sectional interests. While this is a core strength, many of the challenges universities face, and with which they struggle, reflect the inherent complexity of leading change in such a decentralised environment. Participants in our study mentioned this when they spoke about the difficulty of complex complaint or redress systems, the lack of clarity about accountability points, and disconnects between well intentioned statements and system behaviour.

Participants often assumed, and in instances did this with disturbing accounts, a lack of humane or social values on the part of leaders. In our experience, university leaders generally hold values strongly aligned with creating safe environments for staff and students, free from racism and discrimination. Most are committed to creating campus environments where civil discourse is expected and the norm, and creating a safe space for people with culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds. There has been some increase in diversity in leadership in the sector over the years, although religious, cultural and ethnic diversity is not systematically reported. That is one of a number of factors clearly inhibiting institutional trust among many we heard from.

In the analysis of other entrenched problems in universities, we have been struck by consequential decisions being made far from Chancelleries. And being made where the incentives that drive outcomes in both academic and administrative units are largely determined by incentives that seem stubbornly out of the control of the Chancellery and staff. As with those other areas where universities have failed students and staff, this leads us to question whether there are governance frameworks, management and accountability systems that can ensure that intention is translated to institutional change.

If universities are to respond constructively to the experiences of the courageous and generous individuals who contributed to our study, it will require intentional strategies delivered with more attention to detail, from more senior managers, than is normal. This will require consequential operational decisions made a long way from Chancelleries being visible to managers and to the executives to whom they report.

We are conscious that this will require additional reporting within universities, likely also to the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the Department of Education. This will involve a cost to the system, and costs must be justified constantly. Our conclusion is that some cost in system strengthening and accountability systems is necessary at this time, to ensure the visibility of the changes needed. Without additional reporting, it is unlikely that changes will gain the traction needed to address failings. Importantly, we note that the institutional failures reported here themselves have growing costs for the sector.

Our final conclusion is that achieving safety on campus for people with religious, ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds is a very basic objective. It is not a high ambition. It should be a baseline that people in university communities are not bullied because of their identities. It is clear nonetheless that it will take a deliberate set of decisions and then intentional and highly accountable implementation to guarantee even this basic outcome.

Beyond this baseline, however, we would strongly urge universities to aim considerably higher. It is noteworthy that, notwithstanding their negative experiences, many of the staff and students who contributed to this project themselves aspire for universities to reach this higher objective. Universities should aspire to be places where very difficult issues can be discussed within normative expectations implicit in university core values. That is with respect for diverse viewpoints, not allowing simplistic assumptions to be made about others' views, and strong requirements for respectful, evidence-based and pluralist discussion, genuinely open to different viewpoints.

This is a vital role for universities at this time. If universities cannot take on that challenge, civil discourse in broader Australian society will be seriously set back at a time when all our communities need it. This will require an additional level of intentionality and collective leadership. The risks for the university sector are high if action is not taken to address these grave threats to student, staff and community satisfaction in this vital contribution of the sector.

Appendix A – Summary of findings

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

Members of all groups reported instances of microaggressions, bullying and discrimination in classrooms and other university settings. All groups also had experiences of explicit and violent racist incidents. African students emphasised the degree of explicit and violent racism they experienced. This was reinforced by members of other focus groups with darker skin, named by some as anti-Black racism. Pasifika participants who named this also stressed the paradoxical racist stereotype they face, that they will be more physically aggressive, another experience shared by participants describing anti-Black racism.

Participants described the negative impact on their wellbeing, resilience, advancement (either academically or in their careers), and some expressed feelings of futility and doubt regarding their study or career. Students who faced additional discrimination based on disability, sexuality, or gender highlighted the cumulative effect, including difficulties in relying on support for multiple disadvantages.

Indigenous, Jewish, Middle Eastern and Muslim groups shared experiences of hiding their identity, which had negative effects, including, limiting their self-advocacy, undermining their sense of authenticity and wellbeing, and reinforcing the legitimacy of the bullying and outright racist behaviour endured. The same groups described instances of being singled out in classes and forced to explain, defend, and absorb racist tropes. Participants who recounted these incidents felt isolated, stereotyped, and their individuality significantly diminished, risking retaliatory repercussions if they resisted this process.

Jewish, Middle Eastern and Muslim students described being assumed to have predictable and uniform views regarding the conflict in the Middle East. Students from both groups used almost identical words to express distress at the assumption that, because of their identity, they inevitably hated students from the other group. Staff and students from both groups described a lack of sympathy within the universities for distress and trauma as a result of the conflict impacting, for example, their families. Middle Eastern staff described struggling with having to provide mental health support to significant numbers of their students.

The degree of trauma, fear and the sense of institutional hostility was disturbingly strong among Palestinian and Middle Eastern Arab participants. Participants felt particularly vulnerable because many are also international students or are on other visas, which made them feel at risk. There were numerous stories of students fearing that university security services were using that fear to insist that those students not express their views. There were also stories of fearing of being under surveillance.

Indigenous students and staff both suffered from perceptions that they would not be present in universities if not benefiting from (unfair) special treatment. This happened

in class, in assessments, in academic career progression, and in more informal interactions. There were instances of specific targeting of Indigenous students by both other students and staff on this basis. They also felt their attackers were immune to consequences, even when a process was corrected, often after long periods.

Staff and students from both Indigenous and Jewish groups described incidents of "lateral violence" within their communities, including the weaponising of proof of Aboriginality processes, or simple accusations of not being authentically Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or of not being a legitimate Jewish presence or voice if not holding specific views in a polarised world.

Some Asian students still recall being both isolated and neglected during COVID, and some were also subject to racist attacks during the pandemic. International students were very conscious of being treated differently, in a negative, not inclusive, way because of being "cash cows" for the universities. They were also hyperconscious of the sense among domestic students that they were bringing standards and the university experience down for domestic students.

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in addressing racism and discrimination

Staff and students from all groups complained that universities are not sufficiently engaged, clear or proactive enough to set a clear standard against discriminatory and racist behaviour. They criticised a lack of engagement from university executives and questioned the authenticity in their public statements.

Staff and students from all groups described instances of discriminatory rhetoric being defended using arguments about free speech that would not pass tests applied to freedom of academic expression. Some found this deeply challenging because arguing back invited vehement and aggressive doubling down from the person making the rhetorical statements in the first place.

Indigenous staff and students described instances of authorised reasonable adjustments and authorised academic and other assistance programs being delegitimised by staff, contrary to university policies. There were also Middle Eastern students who discussed this in relation to requests for adjustment for distress when families were killed or injured in the conflict in Gaza.

Jewish, Middle Eastern and Muslim staff described a lack of engagement with the specific needs and vulnerabilities of their communities at this time. Some also linked this lack of engagement to assumptions from staff, managers and executives in universities that each of their communities held single, unwavering views hostile to each other.

Middle Eastern staff and students described a lack of professional support programs for students or staff impacted severely by family trauma at present, both with staff informed about the issues and how to relate to them. Some had also encountered racialised responses from services when seeking help. They also told stories of

university executives only wanting to meet them if the meetings were not publicly known, leading to a sense of delegitimising their claims.

The public debate over University Australia's adoption of its statement on antisemitism was described as very damaging by members of both Jewish and Middle Eastern staff and students, notwithstanding a number of Jewish participants welcomed its intent and purpose. Middle Eastern students felt further isolated, with their distress implicitly of lower significance. Many also concluded that any sign of their distress over the Middle East conflict would be punished. Jewish participants were split on the issue. Many talked about the behaviour at public debates (usually they specified not by Middle Eastern people) being confronting and damaging, beyond the substance of the debate. Others expressed fears that the "exceptionalism" represented in the statement would further stereotype them and even put them at risk.

The failure of universities to diffuse the impact on Australian campuses of war in Israel and Gaza was felt acutely by groups with ties to the region. It was also mentioned by members of other groups, some drawing the conclusion that this spoke badly to any complaints they might have being well dealt with and others complaining that the whole issue "occupied all the space" or "took all the oxygen" from any issues impacting religiously, culturally and ethnically diverse university communities. And beyond this, both Pasifika and African students described being even less visible as groups with legitimate interests and claims on universities than other groups.

3. Policies and systems to report, deter and address racism and discrimination are inadequate

Staff and students from all groups expressed a lack of faith in university processes through which they could pursue guidance, complaints, fair mediation of conflicts and redress for damaging impacts from racist or discriminatory incidents. All groups had members who instanced representations or complaints not being responded to, or only after damagingly long periods.

All also raised that serious issues were dealt with at inappropriately junior levels, with unclear and unaccountable escalation processes for handling serious matters. This included responses to violent incidents, which security staff refused to record or escalate, including reports of statements from security staff that implied the victim had brought the issue on themselves.

Students and staff from all groups with intersecting experiences of disadvantage, based for example on disability, sexuality or gender, explained that these cumulative disadvantages exacerbated the challenge of raising problematic issues or making complaints.

Indigenous staff and students cited instances of complaints being met with inappropriate references to their unjustified advantages as a "special" class of employee or student.

Jewish staff and students described experiencing ineffectual processes, where university management and executives would meet with them but not actually commit to specific actions. Many, regardless of their political views, also expressed distress at the neglect of Middle Eastern students' needs.

Middle Eastern staff and students cited even worse instances of refusals by security staff through to university managers to engage. They were the strongest but not the only group to report a sense of complaints, reports of aggression or even violence being met with coded or explicit requests for individuals to hide their identity.

4. Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

Across all groups, participants highlighted examples of constructive leadership and efforts to address issues and opportunities. However, they also often mentioned contrasting interactions and either described how their allies in university leadership struggled to gain traction or noted that positive change 'did not stick', requiring repeated efforts to tackle the same issues. A number, including Indigenous and Pasifika students, described the importance of leaders within their own groups being the key supporters for other students who had had bad experiences.

Staff and students from all groups criticised generic cultural awareness training as tokenistic and 'window dressing'. They expressed much more ambition for organisational development strategies that would be genuinely transformative of university cultures and the safety of culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse groups.

Staff and students from all groups expressed a desire for a more ambitious and positive agenda, including the creation of safe, respectful spaces for contemporary issues, including difficult ones, that could be talked through on the basis that students and staff doing so would be prepared to do so respectfully.

Staff and students from all groups sought institutionalised support for specific cultural needs. For Indigenous people, recognition of cultural obligations being matched by positive support. Both Jewish and Muslim staff and students expressed a desire for recognition and support for holy days and feeling safe to wear clothing that identified their religious identity.

Fundamentally, however, staff and students from all groups, critical and distressed though many were, are invested in universities as special places and settings where great things in terms of cultural safety, engagement and advancement should be the ambitious goal. Several endorsed this vision but most also expressed scepticism of that being a shared objective with university leaderships which they observed mostly trying to weather current conflict and scrutiny.

Appendix B – Key Terms

As identified at the beginning of this report, the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*[1] at S. 9 (1) outlaws racial discrimination. It is essential to recognise its multiple and intersecting forms racism takes in university settings, socially complex environments that can function to permit those who act in racist ways to regard their behaviour as acceptable and those who perceive themselves to be victims of racism to be disregarded. This report draws on established frameworks to categorise racism as occurring at four key levels: individual, internalised, institutional, and structural. These forms are interconnected, reinforcing unequal outcomes unless they are explicitly addressed through policy, practice, and cultural change.

Individual Racism and Discrimination

Individual racism refers to direct acts of interpersonal racism or discrimination expressed through behaviour, language, or attitudes by individuals within the university community. This may include bullying, exclusion, stereotyping, or microaggressions based on race, religion, or cultural background. Such behaviours negatively affect the wellbeing, participation, and sense of belonging of individuals (students and staff) who are targeted.[2]

While often dismissed as isolated incidents, individual racism contributes to a wider culture of exclusion and harm. In our focus groups, instances of individual racism that were first-hand and observed experiences were reported. These experiences of racism and discrimination were encountered by individuals who believe that they were targeted as members of culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse groups, as they navigate academic, social, and institutional environments. They encompassed direct acts of prejudice, exclusion, microaggressions, and bias expressed by other individuals, whether peers, staff, or faculty. In the university context, individual racism reflects the immediate and cumulative impact of these encounters on a person's sense of safety, belonging, and participation.

Internalised Racism

Internalised racism occurs when individuals from culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse groups accept and internalise negative societal beliefs or stereotypes about their own group. This can diminish self-worth, limit aspirations, and influence how individuals engage in academic and professional life.[3] In universities, internalised

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[1] Commonwealth of Australia. 2015. "Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)." https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/cth/consol_act/rda1975202/.

[2] Paradies, Yin. 2006. "A Systematic Review of Empirical Research on Self-Reported Racism and Health." International Journal of Epidemiology 35 (4): 888–901. https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyl056; Sue, Derald Wing, Christina M Capodilupo, Gina C Torino, Jennifer M Bucceri, Aisha M B Holder, Kevin L Nadal, and Marta Esquilin. 2007. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." American Psychologist 62 (4): 271–86. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.62.4.271.

[3] Speight, Suzette L. 2007. "Internalized Racism: One More Piece of the Puzzle." The Counseling Psychologist 35 (1): 126–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006295119.

racism may manifest as disengagement, self-censorship, or reluctance to seek support or assert identity.[4]

Institutional Racism and Discrimination

Institutional racism refers to discriminatory policies, rules, or practices embedded within university environments that systematically disadvantage certain racial or cultural groups, regardless of intent.[5] This may occur in admissions processes, the allocation of student support services, curriculum content, staff recruitment and promotion, in classroom or lecture theatre interactions between students and between staff and students, and, as we found, it also occurs in disciplinary procedures. Even though individuals may report such instances of racism, staff in positions of authority may reject such reports as 'misunderstandings,' or simply not believe the staff or students making the complaints. Because these practices are often masked by formal processes or normalised, they can be challenging to address without sustained institutional self-examination.

Structural Racism and Discrimination

Structural racism refers to the overarching system of social, economic, historical, and political forces that produce and sustain racial inequalities across society and reproduced over generations. In universities, these broader structures shape access to education, cultural representation, knowledge systems, and leadership. Structural racism is maintained through long-standing power hierarchies and social norms and is perpetuated when interventions do not actively address inequity.[6] Without effective disruption, structural racism continues to shape the institutional culture and reproduce disadvantage.

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[4] David, E. J. R., Tiera M. Schroeder, and Jessicaanne Fernandez. 2019. "Internalized Racism: A Systematic Review of the Psychological Literature on Racism's Most Insidious Consequence." Journal of Social Issues 75 (4): 1057–86. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12350.

[5] Ahmed, Sara. 2012. On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. JSTOR. Duke University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1131d2g.

[6] Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 2011. "Virtuous Racial States." Griffith Law Review 20 (3): 641–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/10383441.2011.10854714; Gillborn, David. 2005. "Education Policy as an Act of White Supremacy: Whiteness, Critical Race Theory and Education Reform." ResearchGate. Taylor & Francis (Routledge). July 2005. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241336520_Education_Policy_as_an_Act_of_White_Supremacy_Whiteness_Critical_Race_Theory_and_Education_Reform; Gillborn, David. 2008. Racism and Education. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203928424.

Appendix C - Background literature

To ground the design and conduct of our work, we started by surveying key background literature. The Commission has also contracted a full literature review. The following is a summary of the literature that provided background designed to ground our project, not to duplicate the comprehensive work commissioned separately.

Australian universities are situated within one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse nations in the world. Nearly half of Australia's population is either born overseas or has at least one parent born overseas.[7] In 2024, over 500,000 international students from more than 160 countries were enrolled in Australian universities.[8] Religious diversity has also grown across campuses, with students and staff practising a wide range of faiths, including Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and others.[9] In response, many institutions have established multifaith chaplaincies, prayer spaces, and cultural celebrations. These developments reinforce the essential civic role of universities as spaces that enable the contestation of ideas, civil debate, and community cohesion.[10]

However, despite this diversity, recent evidence highlights that racism and discrimination continue to be pervasive across the higher education sector, manifesting in ways that undermine safety, belonging, and opportunity.[11] Racism in Australian universities takes many forms. It may be overt, such as verbal slurs or social exclusion, or systemic, embedded in policies, curricula, recruitment, and promotion practices. Students and staff alike report both interpersonal and structural forms of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and cultural background. Microaggressions, those subtle, routine forms of bias and exclusion, are common, often go unreported, and accumulate over time to erode the psychological safety and educational or professional experience of those targeted. Power imbalances further compound the harm when institutional responses are absent, ineffective, or inconsistent.

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7 Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2022. "2021 Census: Nearly Half of Australians Have a Parent Born Overseas | Australian Bureau of Statistics." June 28, 2022. https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-nearly-half-australians-have-parent-born-overseas.

8 Yo, Kevin. 2025. "International Students in Australia Hit Record High in 2024." The Institute of Public Affairs. https://ipa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/IPA-Research-Note-February-2024-International-students-record-high-in-2024.pdf.

9 Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2022. "Religious Affiliation in Australia." July 4, 2022. https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia.

10 "A Higher Purpose: Universities, Civic Transformation and The Public Good – Universities Australia." 2019. Universities Australia. May 13, 2019. https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/a-higher-purpose-universities-civic-transformation-and-the-public-good/.

11 "Interim Report on Racism at Australian Universities." 2024. Australian Human Rights Commission. December 19, 2024. https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/interim-report-racism-australian-universities.

For students, racism is experienced through inequitable access, culturally alienating curricula, and exclusionary learning environments. Entry pathways to university often overlook structural inequities such as under-resourced schooling, lack of access to preparatory support, and cultural disconnection.[12] Once enrolled, many students report that course content is constructed on Western assumptions that marginalise, tokenise, or altogether ignore other worldviews. This erasure of non-Western perspectives in curriculum and assessment contributes to a sense of invisibility and invalidation.[13] Students who speak English as a second language or who speak with an accent frequently report linguistic racism, including stereotyping and accent-based bullying.[14] In-class interactions, peer behaviours, and staff expectations often reflect racialised stereotypes,[15] and many students from culturally diverse backgrounds report being subjected to microaggressions and social exclusion that undermine their sense of safety and belonging.[16]

Staff with diverse backgrounds face similar, and in many cases, institutionalised challenges. Racial bias in recruitment and promotion processes limits career advancement, despite equivalent qualifications and performance.[17] Staff from underrepresented backgrounds are often expected to contribute additional labour in the form of diversity work, serving on committees, mentoring students, or acting as cultural translators, without recognition, remuneration, or relief from other duties.[18] Student evaluations of teaching are also consistently reported to reflect racial and gender biases, particularly for women of colour, with significant impacts on performance reviews, promotions, and emotional wellbeing.[19] These forms of racialised labour and evaluation create inequities in workload, reward, and retention.

Indigenous staff and students face deeply entrenched systemic racism that reflects Australia's colonial foundations and ongoing institutional exclusion. Although many

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[12] Molla, Tebeje. "Educational Aspirations and Experiences of Refugee-Background African Youth in Australia: A Case Study." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 25, no. 8 (2019): 877–895.

[13] Omer, M. H. *Racism at the University of Melbourne*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2023.

[14] Dobinson, Toni, and Paula Mercieca. "Seeing Things as They Are, Not Just as We Are: Investigating Linguistic Racism on an Australian University Campus." *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 23, no. 7 (2020): 789–803.; Sender, D. "The Psychological Damages of Linguistic Racism and International Students in Australia." *Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 23, no. 7 (2020): 804–818.

[15] Goldsmith, Ben, Megan MacKenzie, and Tiahna Wynter. "Racial Bias in Academia: An Audit Experiment Revealing Disparities in Faculty Responses to Prospective Students." *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership* 20, no. 1 (2024): 23.

[16] Ogunyemi, Dayo et al. "Microaggressions in the Learning Environment: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 13, no. 2 (2020): 97.

[17] See, for example, Oishi, Naoko. *Workforce Diversity in Higher Education: The Experiences of Asian Academics in Australian Universities*. Melbourne: The Asia Institute, University of Melbourne, 2017.; Cukier, Wendy, Paul Adamu, Charlie Wall-Andrews, and Mohamed Elmi. "Racialized Leaders Leading Canadian Universities." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 49, no. 4 (2021): 565–583.

[18] Hodges, Cheron R., and Omolade M. Welch. "Making Noise and Good, Necessary Trouble: Dilemmas of `Deaning While Black.'" In *Dismantling Institutional Whiteness: Emerging Forms of Leadership in Higher Education*, edited by M. Alcalde and M. Subramaniam, 55–78. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2023.

[19] Heffernan, T. "Sexism, Racism, Prejudice, and Bias: A Literature Review and Synthesis of Research Surrounding Student Evaluations of Courses and Teaching." Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 47, no. 1 (2021): 144–154.

universities have Indigenous student support centres, these culturally safe spaces are often isolated, with the broader campus environment remaining unsafe or unwelcoming. Indigenous students and staff continue to report experiences of cultural disrespect, marginalisation, and underrepresentation. The experience of the 2023 Voice Referendum has further heightened the cultural load and psychological distress faced by many Indigenous university community members.[20] It is also important to recognise the diversity within Indigenous student cohorts, who may face distinct needs or barriers that are not adequately addressed by current models of support.

Racism in universities also intersects with broader geopolitical events. Global conflicts and tensions have a direct impact on the experiences of students and staff, with rising reports of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian discrimination on Australian campuses. Jewish university communities have reported a significant increase in antisemitic incidents since October 2023.[21] At the same time, Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian students and staff face heightened scrutiny, stereotyping, and targeted racism tied to global crises.[22] Asian people's experiences of racial discrimination on campuses have always been high, but increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.[23] These dynamics reveal the ways in which local expressions of racism are shaped by international political contexts and further underscore the need for culturally responsive and politically aware institutional responses.

Experiences of racism and discrimination are compounded for individuals with multiple marginalised identities. Intersectional experiences of racism, those shaped by race alongside gender, sexuality, disability, or class, create complex and often invisible forms of exclusion.[24] These overlapping barriers not only limit access and opportunity but also shape the way racism is experienced, resisted, and addressed. Understanding and responding to intersectional racism is, therefore, critical to any serious attempt to promote equity in higher education.

Although some universities have taken action to address these issues, efforts remain fragmented and uneven across the sector. Several institutions have adopted anti-

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[20] Fredericks, B., Barney, K., Bunda, T., Hausia, K., Martin, A., Elston, J., & Bernardino, B. (2023). Calling out Racism in University Classrooms: The Ongoing Need for Indigenisation of the Curriculum to Support Indigenous Student Completion Rates. *Student Success*, *14*(2), 19–29. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2874

[21] Australian Jewish Higher Education Alliance (5A). *Survey on Antisemitism in Australian Universities*. 2024. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6792c1f364cecb7a17cc7a1e/t/67d95744a32763727144f2be/1742296906935/5A+antisemitism+survey.pdf.

[22] Interim Report on Racism at Australian Universities." 2024. Australian Human Rights Commission. December 19, 2024. https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/interim-report-racism-australian-universities.

[23] Australian Human Rights Commission. *Timeline of Anti-Asian Racism in Australia: Understanding the History and Impacts*. Sydney: AHRC, 2024. https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/02_ahrc_framework_anti-asian_racism_timeline_final.pdf.

[24] Interim Report on Racism at Australian Universities." 2024. Australian Human Rights Commission. December 19, 2024. https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/interim-report-racism-australian-universities.

racism policies or launched action plans,[25] while others have implemented programs such as bystander training,[26] awareness campaigns,[27] and anonymous reporting tools.[28] Collaborative sectoral initiatives, such as Welcoming Universities[29] and the Athena Swan program,[30] have provided frameworks for benchmarking and promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion. However, despite these developments, significant gaps persist. Many universities lack robust systems to monitor progress, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, or ensure cultural safety across the institution. There is no nationally standardised approach for tracking or comparing institutional anti-racism outcomes, and many efforts remain voluntary and uncoordinated.

At the national level, existing legislative and regulatory frameworks are limited in scope. The *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*[31] and the Higher Education Standards Framework[32] mandate general non-discrimination but do not require proactive anti-racism strategies or data collection. Moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive research or prevalence data on racism in the Australian higher education sector, impeding the development of evidence-based responses.

In sum, racism remains an entrenched and multifaceted issue within Australian universities. While diversity on campus is increasing, inclusion, safety, and equity have not kept pace. Discrimination continues to shape access to education, academic progression, career advancement, and wellbeing for both students and staff. Without coordinated, transparent, and culturally safe responses at institutional, sectoral, and national levels, universities risk perpetuating the very inequities they are meant to address.

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[25] Examples include Charles Sturt University's Anti-Racism Policy, University of South Australia's Anti-Racism and Cultural Safety Policy *and* University of Melbourne's Anti-Racism Plan.

[26] Universities currently adopting bystander approaches include Western Sydney, La Trobe, Monash, ANU, RMIT, Flinders, and Wollongong.

[27] For example, 18 universities are currently listed as supporters of the It Stops With Me campaign.

[28] See, for example, Call It Out.

[29] "Welcoming Universities." 2023. Welcoming Australia. June 13, 2023. https://welcoming.org.au/initiatives/welcoming-universities/.

[30] "SAGE Pathway to Athena Swan." n.d. SAGE. https://sciencegenderequity.org.au/sage-accreditation-and-awards/sage-pathway-to-athena-swan/.

[31] Commonwealth of Australia. 2015. "Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)." https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/cth/consol_act/rda1975202/.

[32] TEQSA. 2021. "Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 | Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency." Teqsa.gov.au. 2021. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/how-we-regulate/higher-education-standards-framework-2021.

Appendix D – Project Plan

16/04/2025

Racism@Uni qualitative study of experience of racism and discrimination at Australian universities

Project Plan

Australian Human Rights Commission
everyone, everywhere, everyday

Think Change Resolve

Langton & Partners

1. Project overview

Project context

The Australian Government has funded the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) to undertake the Racism@Uni Study (the Project), in response to Recommendation 33 from the Australian Universities Accord. The Race Discrimination Commissioner is leading the Project with support from the Commonwealth Department of Education and Attorney-General's Department.

The objectives of the Project are:

- promote equality of opportunity in higher education and to address systemic barriers through examining the impact of racism in universities (including those with dual-sector operations);
- add depth and context for establishing a baseline of the experiences of racism; and
- develop recommendations to foster a safe, respectful and inclusive environment for all university students and staff.

The Project aims to identify the nature, impact and experiences of racism at universities (for both students and staff), with a particular focus on (but not limited to) antisemitism, Islamophobia, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, international students, and people from other religious, ethnic, culturally diverse backgrounds, including those experiencing intersecting forms of discrimination with racism.

The Project will include recommendations for reform to Government, universities and other relevant stakeholders to address racism and discrimination. Recommendations made will be evidence-based, specific, measurable, implementable, realistic (e.g. in cost) and will include both immediate and long-term actions, with a focus on systemic and institutional reforms, practices, and standards that can be implemented by universities and Government.

The Project will also have regard to, and complement, the findings of previous and ongoing Australian Government reviews and processes, such as the Commission's National Anti-Racism Strategy and the Government's anti-racism efforts.

The Project involves both quantitative and qualitative data collection.

The quantitative component involves the conduct of a national online survey on the prevalence and impact of racism experienced by students and staff in Australian universities (including those with dual-sector operations). The survey will be conducted concurrent to the qualitative component. A separate fieldwork provider has been engaged to conduct the survey.

The qualitative component involves the conduct of focus groups and is exploratory in nature.

AHRC has engaged Think Change Resolve (TCR) and Langton & Partners (L&P) to deliver the qualitative component of the Project (the Project).

Project requirements

The primary aim of the focus groups is to generate in-depth and contextual information about specific topics and themes of interest, to extend and complement the survey findings being undertaken for the Project.

We recognise that the qualitative aspects of the Project, including the focus groups, must:

- centre the voices of those who have experienced racism at Australian universities as experts of their own experiences, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Asian, Jewish, Muslim, Middle Eastern, African, and Pacifica and South Sea Islander students and/or staff, and international students. We are also approaching the work considering intersecting forms of discrimination, including sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism.
- generate in-depth contextual information to complement the quantitative survey findings
- be conducted with cultural safety and trauma-informed practices based on human rights principles
- lead to a more detailed understanding and actionable recommendations for systemic change, feed student and staff feedback and solutions into recommendation development, and identify further reform directions at institutional university settings
- be carefully and efficiently planned and
- ensure positive participant experiences and collection and accurate reporting of quality data.

As specified in the Service Agreement, the Project will deliver the following:

(i) Development of a project management plan.

(ii) Conduct focus groups with university students (including international students) and staff (both academic and non-academic) of diverse backgrounds, and appropriate key stakeholders, to fulfil the objectives of the Project.

Preparation of an outcomes report (including an interim draft report) - with the focus group findings, identified priorities and recommended key directions, and areas for reform and improvement.

Table 2 provides an overview of our understanding of the project.

Table 2 | Project overview.

Project success ***What is the definition of success for this project?***	AHRC has clear and actionable recommendations that: • Are informed by the lived experiences of university students and staff. • Are developed from evidence-based insights into the nature, and impact of racism in Australian universities. • Offer practical and structural strategies for universities to prevent and address racism effectively. • Complement the survey findings with in-depth qualitative analysis.
Implementation success ***After completion (e.g. 6 months), what benefits should the project have delivered?***	• AHRC has a comprehensive report of findings and recommendations, trusted by students, staff, university stakeholders, and government, that informs policy and institutional responses to racism in universities. • Universities have clear recommendations for improving cultural safety, anti-racism policies, and reporting mechanisms. • Key stakeholder groups (students, staff, university leadership, and policymakers) have increased awareness and guidance on addressing systemic racism. • AHRC is able to use the findings to support national reform discussions and engage with government and university leadership.
What questions will we work to answer?	• What forms does racism take, and how does it impact students and staff? • What barriers exist in reporting and/or addressing racism within universities? • What systemic changes are required to create safer, anti-racist, and more inclusive environments? • What best practices can be identified for preventing and responding to racism?
How will we present our findings?	• TCR will share insights from the focus groups continuously, as they become available, during project meetings. • Draft Interim Outcomes Report, including preliminary recommendations (18 July 2025) for AHRC feedback. • Final Outcomes Report (18 August 2025), incorporating revisions and including implementation strategy for recommendations, delivered by AHRC by July 31.
What are the key project steps and approaches?	Stage 1 – Project Planning (3 March – 4 April 2025): Establish project frameworks, deliver Project Plan, confirm stakeholder engagement, and develop research materials. Stage 2 – Preparation & Recruitment (10 March – 11 April 2025): Conduct stakeholder interviews, finalise recruitment and facilitation protocols, and submit documentation to the Ethics Centre for advice on ethical conduct of the project. Upon approval, implement recruitment strategy. Stage 3 – Focus Group Implementation (14 April – 20 June 2025): Conduct 26 focus groups and facilitate written submissions.

Project success ***What is the definition of success for this project?***	AHRC has clear and actionable recommendations that: • Are informed by the lived experiences of university students and staff. • Are developed from evidence-based insights into the nature, and impact of racism in Australian universities. • Offer practical and structural strategies for universities to prevent and address racism effectively. • Complement the survey findings with in-depth qualitative analysis.
	Stage 4 – Data Analysis & Reporting (23 June – 18 August 2025): Conduct qualitative analysis, validate findings, and produce draft and final reports. Project closure: 18 August 2025
AHRC day-to-day project contact	Lobna Rouhani
AHRC strategic contact/reference group	Giridharan Sivaraman Hashini Panditharatne Jennifer Renda Lobna Rouhani Rachel Law
TCR project team	Robert Griew – Project Director, providing strategic oversight and expert review. Prof. Marcia Langton AO – Expert Lead, guiding project framing and Indigenous engagement. Dr. Kylie Gwynne – Methods Lead, ensuring methodological rigour and qualitative analysis. Ieva Rozentale – Project Manager, overseeing project execution, stakeholder coordination, and reporting. Dr. Alex San Martim Portes – Consultant, Human Rights Specialist, supporting qualitative analysis and reporting. Vithja Tong – Consultant, contributing to qualitative data analysis and stakeholder engagement. Mubarak Almattar – Engagement Lead, leading facilitation, engagement, and delivery. Jimmy Sebire – Indigenous Engagement Lead, facilitating culturally safe discussions and analysis. Marilyn Morgan – Trauma-Informed Practice Lead, ensuring cultural safety and participant well-being.
Which stakeholder perspectives (inside and outside the organisation) are crucial to the success of the project?	University staff and students (to provide lived experience insights). Diversity, equity, and inclusion officers at universities. Cultural and faith-based organisations supporting affected student and staff groups. Peak bodies and university leadership (to ensure institutional responsiveness). Government and policy stakeholders (for systemic impact and legislative considerations).
Is anything out of bounds?	The project does not require HREC approval, as it is a policy-oriented consultation, not formal research. The project does not engage in individual case investigations or legal assessments of racism complaints.

Project success ***What is the definition of success for this project?***	AHRC has clear and actionable recommendations that: • Are informed by the lived experiences of university students and staff. • Are developed from evidence-based insights into the nature, and impact of racism in Australian universities. • Offer practical and structural strategies for universities to prevent and address racism effectively. • Complement the survey findings with in-depth qualitative analysis.
Will anything (e.g. related initiatives, other changes happening in the organisation or issues of organisational culture) impact our ability to deliver on this project?	Potential timeline extensions by the Department could affect reporting deadlines. University semester schedules may impact recruitment and participation in focus groups. External events (e.g., political or social developments) could influence participant engagement and discussion topics.

2. Methodology

Data sources and sampling strategy

The Project will use qualitative interviewing, focus groups, and thematic analysis as our primary methods. This will be supported by iterative co-creation of the process and implementation of the Project. We will include three distinct groups - stakeholders, students and staff across Australian universities (including dual-sector operators) to explore the impact of racism in Australian universities. We will collect data in a two-step process from the following sources:

Step 1: Stakeholder co-design consultations to inform focus group recruitment and design

- 12 stakeholder co-design consultations, individually or in small groups (the process, sampling and recruitment strategies for each cohort's stakeholders are described in more detail below);
- Written advice submissions on co-design, if the stakeholders are not available for a consultation;

Step 2: Implementation of focus groups

26 focus groups with students and staff representing various Australian Universities (see below for an overview of the groups and 0 for a complete list of the focus groups and a more detailed sampling approach).

- Additionally, we will provide an opportunity for participants to submit first-person narrative written accounts of experiences via a project website to broaden the representation.

1. Stakeholder co-design consultations

We will invite stakeholders to meet with us in small groups or individually to provide advice on creating focus groups as culturally safe, inclusive, trauma-informed and representative spaces, responsive to the specific needs of different communities

The stakeholders are invited to provide advice in three broad areas – recruitment pathways, focus group design features, focusing on cultural safety and sensitivities, and referral connections for enhancing recruitment and engagement and ensuring the well-being of participants.

They are offered two participation options: either a brief, scheduled interview via Zoom or a secure online feedback form where stakeholders can respond at their convenience. The written feedback at this stage will be solely for gathering the stakeholders' suggestions on co-designing the focus groups, not for sharing their lived experiences of racism.

These conversations will directly inform our approach to:

- Participant recruitment strategies and pathways (e.g. social media, via trusted groups, etc.)
- Focus group design (facilitation, venues, support staff, de-briefing, referral points)
- Focus group scripts and questions (and the methods for asking those questions).

Through consultations, we will develop briefing sheets for facilitators specific to each target cohort. These will include specific advice about how to ensure participants' comfort and safety (e.g., dress, facilitation approach, language, and behavioural dos/don'ts, etc.). These will then be reviewed by stakeholders for accuracy and appropriateness.

This process is critical to the success of the project and is undertaken by project team members with lived experience, connections to the target cohorts and skills in qualitative interviewing and co-design methods.

The selection of stakeholders to engage with is based on the stakeholder lists provided by AHRC, as the starting point. The final list of stakeholders has been identified and selected based on their community leadership, institutional knowledge, advocacy experience, and proximity to key student and staff groups.

Asian and/or international students and staff

To inform the focus groups for Asian and international participants, we are engaging with stakeholders from:

- Student organisations and research centres from universities with the highest numbers of students from these backgrounds, including Monash University, University of Melbourne, University of Sydney, University of Queensland, University of Western Australia, and the University of Adelaide.

- National academic networks and associations that reflect the diverse demographics of Asia, including representation from South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia.
- National and institutional-level organisations in international education are also being engaged (e.g. International Education Association of Australia, International Students Association, International Houses at major universities), to ensure broader sector insights.

Jewish students and staff

To support the focus groups centred on the experiences of Jewish students and staff, our approach includes outreach to:

- University-based organisations such as the Australian Union of Jewish Students (AUJS), and residential colleges with strong Jewish student communities.
- Faith-based and community organisations, including Chabad, Netzer Australia, state-based Boards of Deputies, and synagogues.
- Academic experts and advocates.

Muslim and/or Middle Eastern students and staff

To inform the focus groups for Muslim and Middle Eastern participants, we are engaging with stakeholders from:

- Muslim student organisations from universities with high Muslim enrolments, including Victoria University, University of Melbourne, La Trobe University, UTS, University of Sydney, Western Sydney University, and ANU.
- Academic and research institutions, including the ANU Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies and CSU's Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation.
- Palestinian student clubs/associations at universities, including the University of Sydney, the University of Queensland and UNSW.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff

To inform the focus groups for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, we are engaging with stakeholders from:

- Universities with high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments, including ECU, SCU, UQ, Griffith, CQU, JCU, WSU, UNE, UOW, Flinders, CDU and QUT; particularly, Indigenous Student Support Centres and senior Indigenous leadership at these institutions.
- National Indigenous professional associations and networks, such as AIDA, CATSINaM, IAHA, and NATSIPA.
- Indigenous scholars, practitioners and advisors identified through the Commission's stakeholder list and relevant community networks.

African students

To inform the focus groups for African participants, we will build on the prior relationships and stakeholder lists that the Commission built with active African student societies, as well as academics of African backgrounds. These include representation in each state, with the following universities being listed: UOS, UNSW, UTS, Macquarie; RMIT, Monash, La Trobe, Deakin, and UoM; UQ, Griffith, JCU; Flinders, UniAdelaide, UniSA; Curtin and Murdoch; UTAS; CDU; ANU. We will write to all members of this list and hold co-design sessions with those who choose to participate.

Pacifica and South Sea Islander students

Based on our background research, the population distribution is highest in north Queensland and the main Queensland universities reflect this with specific programming and student organisations at James Cook and Central Queensland universities, the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, and Griffith University. Outside Queensland, the two standouts are ANU (which has a historic mandate, reflected in the College of Asian and the Pacific) and Western Sydney University, with both a local population and having paid specific focused attention.

For co-design consultations, we will approach the university student support centres, the South Sea Islander Student Associations, and senior academics of Pacifica and South Sea Islander heritage.

Intersectional approach to stakeholder engagement

To support the design of focus groups, ensure intersectional and cross-community experiences are meaningfully reflected, and support outreach to students and staff with intersecting or underrepresented identities, we are engaging with:

- Academics and university staff with expertise in racism, migration, cultural diversity, and inclusion (e.g. at Monash, UNSW, UniMelb, ANU, JCU, CDU, Adelaide)
- Student organisations and collectives working across identities and communities (e.g. international societies, multicultural associations, LGBTQIA+ and queer collectives, refugee and equity-focused clubs)
- National and community-level organisations focused on multicultural engagement, anti-racism, and social inclusion.

Second mail-out following stakeholder consultations

After completing initial consultations and incorporating feedback into our focus group design and materials (including clearance from the Ethics Centre), we will conduct a second round of outreach. This mail-out will be directed to the extended list of contacts gathered through the consultation process and will:

- Share finalised details about how to participate in the Project, including registration links for focus groups, and portals for submitting written experiences or suggestions.
- Encourage recipients to circulate the invitation widely to ensure diverse participation.
- Clearly communicate that demand may exceed available places in focus groups and invite individuals to contribute via the submission portal if not selected or if they prefer an alternative format.

This second mail-out ensures that all key contacts are informed and invited to support broad, inclusive engagement across their networks.

2. Focus groups

The Project will conduct 26 focus groups, targeting 31 of Australia's 42 universities. For a detailed breakdown of the sampling strategy and a list of all focus groups, see Appendix 1. The sections below describe an overview of the sampling criteria guiding our strategy, the coverage of focus groups, and additional considerations that will influence the final composition of the focus group samples.

Sampling strategy and rationale: Capturing both depth and breadth of experiences across Australia's university sector

The sampling strategy is purposive and principle-driven, aiming to ensure thematic saturation within key cohorts while surfacing underrepresented, complex, and intersectional experiences. The selection of universities and groups was not intended to mirror demographic representation but to create conditions for depth, diversity, and contextual understanding of racism in higher education.

Our sampling framework is guided by four principles, prioritised in the following order:

1) Population concentration of key groups

Focus groups were concentrated in locations and institutions with the highest enrolments of the target cohorts (e.g. Indigenous, Muslim, Jewish, Asian students) to maximise participation and ensure cultural legitimacy. This also enables cross-institutional recruitment within key cities and regions where cohort density is highest (e.g. Western Sydney, Melbourne, South-East Queensland).

2) Issue and nuance in reported experiences

This principle reflects both the frequency and severity of reported racism. It informed prioritisation of cohorts where racism has been consistently documented, underreported, or under-acknowledged in institutional responses—such as anti-Asian racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and systemic exclusion of Indigenous staff.

However, our aim is not only to capture the most common forms of racism but also to create space for nuanced, intersectional, and institutionally specific forms of exclusion that are often overlooked. This includes experiences of racism compounded by ableism, sexism, or homophobia. Hence, the strategy balances prevalent and marginalised perspectives through layered sampling and open-ended recruitment.

3) Geographic representation

We ensured coverage across all states and territories (with special attention to regional and remote settings), so that institutional, policy, and community-level factors shaping racism in universities could be more fully understood.

4) Diversity of university types

We included a range of universities—Go8, regional, technology and teaching-focused institutions—to account for variability in institutional culture, student/staff demographics, and responses to racism.

Our approach ensures thematic saturation (90% typically reached after 5 groups), coverage of all major population centres, representation across university types, multiple data points for each group, and cross-validation through national groups.

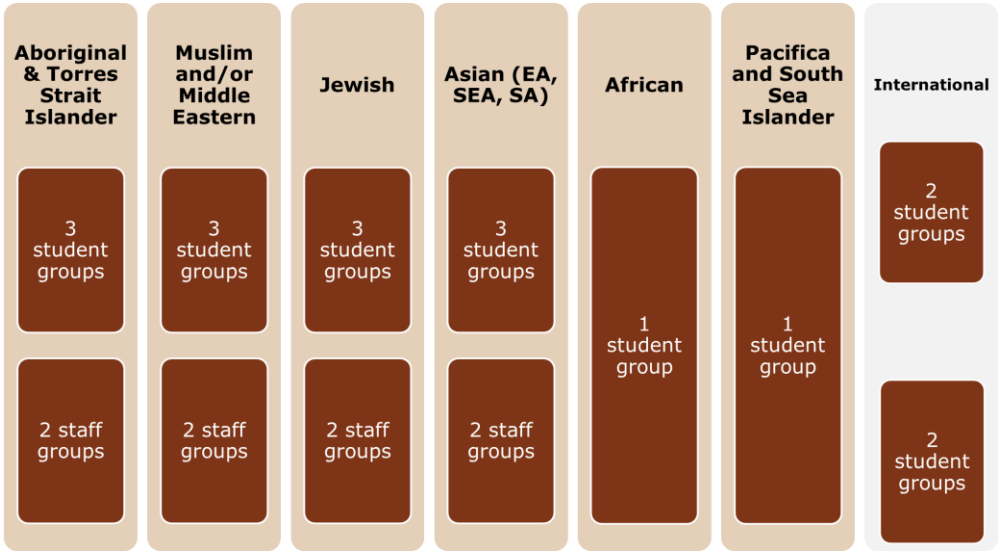
Even though some universities might not be represented, this design supports both national-level findings and context-specific insights, while enabling comparison across institutional types and locations. The focus groups are not intended to replicate the survey's representativeness but to uncover knowledge gaps, intersectional dynamics, and depth of lived experience that large-scale instruments typically overlook.

Focus group selection

As outlined in Figure 1, the focus groups will include:

- Three focus groups each for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Muslim and Middle Eastern, Jewish and Asian students. These groups will not be duplicates in composition. They aim to cover both metropolitan and regional universities. They will potentially be divided into smaller sub-cohorts based on stakeholder advice from Stage 1 interviews (for example, possible standalone sub-groups to cater to cohorts like Muslim, Middle Eastern, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and East Asian stakeholders, respectively).
- Four online national focus groups for international students and those with intersectional identities.
- One focus group for African, and Pacifica and South Sea Islander students respectively.
- For staff, focus groups are split by professional and academic roles to address potential power dynamics and ensure different perspectives are heard.

Figure 1 | Sampling strategy overview



In addition to these core cultural and ethnic cohorts, the Project will also address a wide range of experiences in the recruitment and selection of focus group participants, including those from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, sexuality and gender identities, disability, migrant and refugee backgrounds, faith-based backgrounds, and rural, regional and remote locations.

Furthermore, the proposed focus group distribution (Tables 2 and 3) integrates both in-person and online formats and is informed by key sampling strategies identified below.

Table 3 | Geographic distribution of Focus Groups

	Urban	Regional	National
NSW	The University of Newcastle (UoN), The University of Wollongong (UoW), Western Sydney University (WSU), The University of Sydney (UoS), University of New South Wales (UNSW), Macquarie University (MQ), University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australian Catholic University (ACU)	University of New England (UNE), Charles Sturt University (CSU)	✓
QLD	Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Griffith University (GU), University of Queensland (UQ), Bond University (BU)	The Southern Cross University (SCU), Central Queensland University (CQU), James Cook University (JCU)	✓

VIC	Monash University (MU), University of Melbourne (UoM), Swinburne University (SU), Victoria University (VU), La Trobe University (LTU), Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)	✓
WA	Curtin University (CU), Edith Cowan University (ECU) University of Western Australia (UWA), Murdoch University (Murdoch)	✓
NT	Charles Darwin University (CDU), Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BI)	✓
ACT	Australian National University (ANU)	✓
TAS		✓
SA	Flinders University (Flinders), The University of Adelaide (UA)	✓

Table 4 | Focus group distribution by cohort

	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Muslim	Jewish	Asian	African	Pacifica and South Sea Islander	International	Intersectional
Students	UNE, SCU, UoN, UoW, WSU, UoS, CQU, JCU, QUT, GU, CDU, UQ CU, ECU	VU, UoM, LTU, UTS, UoS, WSU, CSU, ANU	UoM, MU, SU, UNSW, UTS, MQ, UQ, Bond	MU, UoM, RMIT, UoS, MQ, ACU, UWA, Murdoch, Flinders, UoA	UOS, UNSW, UTS, Macquarie, RMIT, Monash, La Trobe, Deakin, UoM, UQ, GU, JCU, Flinders, UniAdelaide, UniSA, Curtin, Murdoch, UTAS, CDU, ANU.	JCU, CQU, UQ, QUT, GU, ANU, CAP, WSU	✓	✓
Professional staff	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Academic staff	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓

Introducing cohort sub-groupings after stakeholder co-design consultations

To ensure cultural safety and diversity of experiences, we will consider further breaking down the groups into smaller cohorts. Based on current planning, the groupings could be defined as follows:

- Asian students and staff: Divided into two (for staff) or three groups (for students) — East Asian and South/Southeast Asian — to reflect the distinct ways these communities experience racialisation and discrimination.
- Muslim and/or Middle Eastern students: Divided into Middle Eastern (non-Muslim and Muslim groups) and other Muslim groups to better reflect the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and racialisation.
- Intersectional groups: One group will centre on participants facing racism compounded by sexism, homophobia or transphobia, and another will focus on those who face additional barriers due to ableism.

These may be further refined based on stakeholder input. We note that such changes to the original sampling might come at the expense of institutional and geographic representation and such risks will be discussed with the Commission.

Screening for saturation, safety, and diversity

Rather than rigidly assigning participants to predefined groups, we will use the focus group framework as a guiding tool during the screening of expressions of interest.

Participants will be:

- Offered the option to nominate which focus group(s) best reflect their identity/experiences.
- Provided with an opportunity to flag any group composition concerns (e.g. peers they do not feel safe sharing space with).
- Asked open-ended questions to capture additional identity dimensions (e.g. disability, sexuality, gender identity) or contextual factors that may guide placement into a suitable group.

This screening process enables us to maintain thematic saturation while ensuring intra-group safety and comfort, especially in communities where intra-group dynamics or lateral violence may be present. These insights will guide final group composition decisions and be adjusted based on ongoing stakeholder consultations.

The sample will also consider the experiences of former students. Based on stakeholder interviews, in many cohorts, former students would serve as better informants, as they have spent more time at the university and face no potential or perceived repercussions from expressing their views. Former students will be included in the same focus groups. To avoid compromising the inter-group dynamic, we will only include former students who graduated in the last three years.

Commitment to flexibility and adaptation

The strategy allows us to develop our approach further should there be greater interest in participation or if we observe gaps or underrepresentation. Based on recruitment, we will adjust online and in-person formats and combine or split groups.

3. Written submissions

We will establish a submission link via the Project Expression of Interest Form for participants to provide written input as an alternative to focus group participation. While the link will be publicly accessible, it will be actively promoted to individuals and groups identified through the project's expression of interest process—particularly those who are unable or unwilling to participate in a focus group. This may include participants from overrepresented cohorts, individuals whose availability does not align with focus group scheduling, or those who are not comfortable sharing in a group setting due to personal, cultural, or safety reasons.

The submissions will be included in the content synthesis and thematic analysis. We will provide a list of submissions in our report. Written submissions can be submitted anonymously and will be identified as such in the report. The participants submitting entries will be asked to provide the same demographic and screening details as the people expressing interest in focus groups. These submissions will be separate from the stakeholder submissions for co-design mentioned earlier and administered at different times.

The written submission portal will be hosted via a secure Microsoft SharePoint form on TCR's enterprise account, which is protected by enterprise-level security and data governance protocols. The form will be part of the broader Expression of Interest (EOI) form, which will be the main recruitment and screening device (see below). This platform ensures all submissions are encrypted in transit and at rest, accessible only to authorised project team members. Participants will be informed that they can choose to submit anonymously, and no IP addresses or identifying metadata will be collected. The privacy and confidentiality of all data submitted through this form will be managed per Australian privacy laws and ethical guidelines, with clear information on the submission page outlining participants' rights and how their data will be used.

Recruitment and implementation

A multi-channel approach to recruitment and outreach

Trust will be fundamental to recruitment for this project. Our project team and specialist brains trust have longstanding, deep and wide connections and networks to drive recruitment for this project. We will also use specific recruitment strategies through established groups as detailed below.

Institution-based recruitment

We will connect, using our broad and deep national network, with university equity and diversity offices, Indigenous education units, and student associations. These connections will enable direct communication with potential participants through trusted institutional channels. International student offices will support engagement with international student communities, while faculty and school-level communications will help reach academic and professional staff to invite participation.

When engaging participants through institutional channels, we will clearly communicate that the Project is independent of the university and that universities

will not have access to any data or submissions collected as part of the Project.

Community-led engagement

Working through cultural and religious community organisations forms a crucial part of our strategy. We will connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, Muslim, Middle Eastern, Jewish, African, Asian, Pacifica and South Sea Islander, and international student community groups, and other groups representing communities likely to experience racism, as well as professional academic networks. Alumni networks will help us reach recent graduates who can provide valuable retrospective insights.

Targeted digital outreach

A dedicated Project webpage hosting an EOI form will serve as a central information point. We will run a focused social media campaign through university and community channels and create shareable digital content. Email campaigns through relevant networks will complement these efforts.

Ensuring diverse representation

We recognise that formal networks may miss less engaged voices. We will work through student support services to reach students who are not active in cultural groups. In addition, we will consider direct outreach in common areas and study spaces, provide anonymous online expression of interest options, as well as multiple participation formats (group, individual, written).

Focus group design and implementation

Session structure

Each focus group will include up to 18 participants and run for 90 minutes, with an additional 30 minutes allocated for orientation and debriefing. We will initially recruit 20 participants per group to account for potential attrition while maintaining ideal group sizes for meaningful discussion.

Mixed-mode delivery

Our approach combines online and in-person sessions to maximise accessibility and participant comfort. Online delivery will use a secure video conferencing platform (Zoom) with email verification of participants, pre-session technical checks, and digital collaboration tools. This format has proven increasingly popular as it reduces travel barriers, provides greater anonymity and security, and enables flexible scheduling.

For in-person groups, we will secure accessible and enclosed venues through university and other partnerships, ensuring culturally appropriate spaces with necessary support staff and amenities. Transport assistance will be available to reduce participation barriers.

We currently estimate that up to eight groups will be on-site, with the remaining 16 groups online. However, that might change based on stakeholder consultations, participant preferences and communication with the Commission's team.

Facilitation model

Each focus group will be led by two facilitators:

- An experienced focus group moderator ensuring methodological consistency.
- A peer facilitator from the focus community promoting engagement and cultural safety.

Both facilitators will be involved in pre-session planning and post-session analysis.

Cultural safety and trauma-informed practice

We prioritise participant well-being through comprehensive pre-session support, careful session management, and post-session care (more detail in Table 3 below). During the stakeholder consultations, we will develop a distress protocol and support/referral list appropriate for each focus group.

In addition, before each group, participants will receive clear information about the process and expectations, with opportunities to ask questions and choose their preferred participation mode. During sessions, experienced facilitators implement cultural safety protocols and trauma-informed approaches (for more detail, see Section 2.4 below). Afterwards, we will provide debriefing opportunities and refer to other relevant support services such as helplines and community services, if the need has been expressed.

The approach and all the relevant documentation for implementing the focus groups, including the protocols and facilitator scripts, will be submitted for review to the Ethics Centre (for more information, see the section on Ethical Conduct below). We will also invite the Commission to review this document prior to the commencement of the focus groups.

Reciprocity

A voucher of $50 will be offered to each student participant along with culturally appropriate catering for each in-person focus group as a recognition of the time, commitment, and costs associated with participation. The cost of this reciprocity payment is discussed in the budget section later in this proposal.

Qualitative analysis and report

Data collection and storage

We will not collect or store any identifying information of individuals. Data is collected only for the specific, agreed purposes of the project and is not used for any secondary purpose without explicit consent.

Stakeholder groups informing focus group design

It is important that stakeholders endorse the approaches we adopt in the focus groups. We will seek permission before attributing the advice provided by organisations in the stakeholder consultations. We will provide an opportunity for each organisation to review and confirm our record of their advice prior to providing it to any other parties or relying upon it for the focus groups.

Focus groups

Participants are informed about how their data will be used, stored, and disposed of, and consent is obtained before collection. We will seek permission from each focus group to record the online and in person sessions for the sole purpose of accurately collecting data. The recordings will be destroyed once the deidentified focus group notes are finalised. Focus group notes will be securely stored in a password-protected, cloud-based file with multi-factor authentication. Access will only be available to team members and only for the term of the project. Once the project is completed, the data will be securely stored in accordance with TCR retention schedule of 3 years. Data handling complies with the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs) and the Project contract.

Thematic data analysis and member checking

There is growing evidence about the importance of interpreting qualitative data using culturally informed approaches to ensure language and meaning are properly interpreted in the analysis. Once the notes are completed, an inductive thematic analysis will be undertaken of the data from each focus group and submissions by two members of the team with at least one member bringing lived experience to the analysis. For the groups where we have no team members with lived experiences directly available, we will rely more on member checking and within-group validation. The analysis will identify patterns, themes and categories that emerge and will be summarised.

The team and expert brains trust will then meet and via a workshop format co-chaired by Marcia and Robert, discuss the 26 focus group summaries and the written submissions. They will use their lived experience and qualitative analytical skills to identify similarities and differences by region (urban/rural/state/territory), university type, and cohort (staff/student/cultural group). A consensus-based approach will be adopted to identify the key themes and recommendations. Where agreement cannot be reached, all perspectives will be reported with explanation and relevant context. This analysis will form the basis of our findings and recommendations.

A two-page summary of the overarching themes will be developed and distributed to stakeholder groups from Stage 1 and the Commission for critical review. This process, known as member checking, is intended to validate themes and identify any gaps that may have been missed. Feedback from stakeholders and the Commission will be incorporated into the findings.

Report

We will prepare an interim draft report for the Commission that presents our methods, in-depth findings, and recommendations to help foster a safe, respectful, inclusive university environment. Once we have incorporated the Commission's feedback, we will finalise our report.

Ethical conduct of the project

Ensuring ethical conduct of the project

Our approach acknowledges the sensitive nature of this project and as such rigorous ethical standards and safeguards are embedded throughout.

Throughout the project, we will address the seven pillars of ethical research, adapted from national and international standards of human research ethics, including the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research.

1) Respect for Persons

We recognise the autonomy and dignity of individuals. We will obtain informed consent from participants, ensuring they understand the purpose, risks, and benefits of participation. We will assure them they can withdraw at any time without consequences.

2) Beneficence

We will maximise potential benefits and minimise potential harm to participants. We have ensured our design is robust and minimises risks through co-creation of approaches. We have carefully examined the risks and detailed them in Table 3.

3) Justice

We will avoid the exploitation of vulnerable populations. A small honorarium will be paid to student participants in recognition of their sharing of knowledge (see note in text above regarding amount). We will also ensure an equitable selection of participants, casting our invitations to participate widely and with careful design in terms of method, as outlined elsewhere in this proposal.

4) Integrity

We will be honest and transparent in our process and clearly report our methods, findings, and conclusions.

5) Accountability

We will adhere to ethical and cultural guidelines and advice, as well as institutional and other relevant requirements. We will ensure proper documentation and oversight throughout the project and that issues or concerns raised are dealt with responsibly and transparently.

6) Privacy and Confidentiality

We will protect the identity and data of participants. We will not collect personal information. We will use data collected solely for the purposes of the project.

7) Social Responsibility

Our team only conducts work that contributes positively to society. We do not undertake work that may cause social harm or perpetuate inequalities. We do what we can to ensure findings are used ethically and for the greater good.

Independent oversight

To ensure independent ethical oversight, we have engaged an external organisation, The Ethics Centre, to provide this function. Their role includes:

- Reviewing and advising on focus group protocols, facilitator guidance, and participant materials.
- Providing input on the distress protocol, support referral process, and screening and allocation framework.
- Testing the cultural safety and ethical robustness of the methods across diverse population groups.
- Discussing escalation pathways for ethical concerns raised by participants or facilitators.
- Advising on how best to communicate participant rights and support options, particularly for those engaging anonymously or from at-risk communities.
- Advising on ethical conduct in data management and analysis.

Draft materials and methodological documentation will be submitted to The Ethics Centre for review throughout the entire project, with space for feedback and revision. The Centre's involvement ensures that ethical standards are not only met but proactively reviewed and adapted throughout the project, bringing an additional layer of independence and expertise to our governance process.

Expanding the notion of consent

Based on the first engagements with the Ethics Centre, we have adopted an expansive approach to consent for all cohorts in this project. This approach extends the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), grounding it in First Nations-led methodologies, and shaped by trauma-aware and community-informed principles. Our consent framework is responsive to cultural, contextual and relational ethics, recognising the risks faced by individuals from marginalised communities.

Informed consent in this Project is not treated as a one-time procedural formality but as an ongoing process shaped by:

- Participant agency and choice: Individuals will choose the method, timing, and extent of their engagement—including group participation, written submission, and modes of expression (verbal, written, silent presence).
- Intra-community dynamics: We acknowledge that for some participants, their community membership or public association with the Project may have implications beyond the focus group. Participants will be advised that the Project team cannot manage community relationships on their behalf, we will provide clear information about the nature of participation so they can make fully informed decisions about their involvement.
- Safety and transparency: Participants will be given opportunities to flag concerns in the registration process, including preferences about who they do or do not wish to be grouped with. We will not share this information with others but will use it to make ethically sound group composition decisions.
- Real-time validation: As we are not collecting personal identifiers, we ensure accuracy and respect in representation by verifying meaning and language during sessions. Facilitators will use gentle check-ins and reflective listening to confirm how participants want their experiences and perspectives to be understood.
- Flexible withdrawal: Participants can withdraw from the process at any time, without explanation or penalty.

3. Project approach and timeline

Staging and key activities

Our project follows a four-stage implementation process (see below for an overview) designed to ensure thorough preparation, effective delivery and meaningful analysis.

These stages overlap where necessary to maintain efficiency and adhere to agreed deadlines. The process is structured to ensure culturally safe, trauma-informed engagement, while capturing insights that inform actionable recommendations.

Throughout all stages, we maintain close engagement with the Commission, the Advisory Committee and other key stakeholders to test and refine our approach.

- **Stage 1** focuses on **Project initiation**, establishing the project's frameworks, confirming engagement strategies, and developing key materials to guide stakeholder consultations and focus group planning.
- **Stage 2** involves **comprehensive preparation for focus group implementation**, including stakeholder interviews to co-design focus groups, finalising research protocols, securing partnerships, and launching the recruitment campaign.
- **Stage 3** encompasses the **systematic delivery of focus groups**, ensuring structured facilitation across in-person and online formats, as well as the administration of participant incentives and written submissions.

- **Stage 4** focuses on **data analysis and reporting**, synthesising qualitative insights, validating findings, and developing clear, actionable recommendations for the AHRC.

The Project will be delivered over **24 working weeks from 3 March to 18 August 2025**, ensuring an efficient and structured approach to achieving key milestones.

Table 5 provides an overview of the project activities by stage.

Table 5 | Project activities by stage.

	STAGE 1 3 March – 4 April, 2025	STAGE 2 10 March – 11 April, 2025	STAGE 3 14 April – 20 June, 2025	STAGE 4 23 June – 18 August, 2025
Key Activities	**Set project up for success** Conduct kick-off meeting to agree project plan with AHRC, including scope, timeframes, methodology, governance and compliance in the review. **Develop and deliver project plan,** including: Outline of the planning and strategies in each phase of the project. Outline of the proposed methodology Project timeline tool. **Confirm stakeholder engagement approach and**	**Conduct stakeholder co-design interviews** **Ethics Centre engagement** **Develop protocols, guides, and materials** Create comprehensive protocols, consultation guides, recruitment and supporting materials **System set up, venue admin, and testing** Establish the systems and support for focus groups and written submissions. **Partnership outreach** Build and strengthen	**Focus group implementation** Facilitate the focus groups Administration and implementation of incentives for participants **Written submission** Open written submission channels for students and staff to shared lived experiences	**Qualitative data analysis** Analyse and synthesise Member checking Refer/relate to the Project's survey findings if available Deliver fieldwork progress updates during **Develop Draft and Final reports** Deliver Draft interim outcome report Integrate AHRC feedback on the draft to construct the Final

	begin engagement Work with AHRC to identify internal and external stakeholders and agree best engagement approach Develop consultation guides Commence stakeholder engagement	relationships with key partners to secure support for research in the following stage **Recruitment campaign** Implement the recruitment strategy to maximise reach and participation	Outcomes Report.

Project timeline and roadmap

Figure 2 presents the timeline for this project along with the main deliverables.

Figure 2 | Project timeline

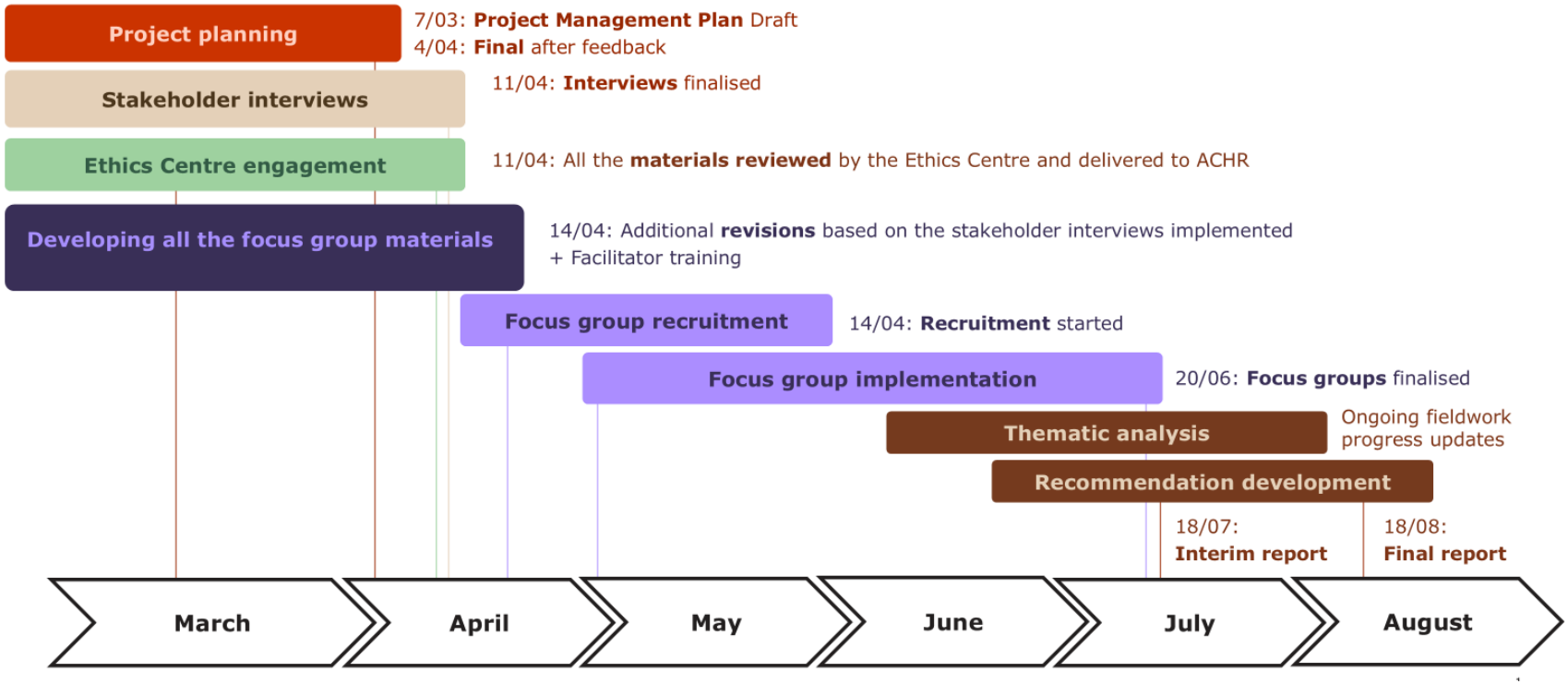


Table 6 presents a more detailed weekly timeline tool – a roadmap - to enable monitoring and adherence to project milestones.

Table 6 | Project weekly roadmap

Week	Priorities	Activities	Deliverables / Milestones
Week 1 (Mar 3 – Mar 9)	Kick-off project and establish project infrastructure	Inception meeting with AHRC; Confirm working methods, communication protocols, and meeting schedule	**4 Mar**: Inception meeting **7 Mar:** Project management plan
Week 2 (Mar 10 – Mar 16)	Finalise recruitment and stakeholder strategy	Begin outreach to stakeholders for co-design interviews; Draft recruitment and communications materials; Prepare Ethics Submission (all FG materials)	Stakeholder outreach begins
Week 3 (Mar 17 – Mar 23)	Submit first draft materials to the Ethics Centre	Conduct stakeholder interviews; Submit first version of focus group documents for review	**Ethics submission (v1)**
Week 4 (Mar 24 – Mar 30)	Continue stakeholder interviews and refine recruitment materials	Continue interviews; Finalise team roles; Refine materials based on feedback	Interviews ongoing
Week 5 (Mar 31 – Apr 6)	Finalise project plan and Ethics Centre revisions	Submit second/final version to Ethics Centre; Prep recruitment and facilitator training	**4 Apr**: Revised Project Management Plan **Ethics submission (v2)**

Week	Priorities	Activities	Deliverables / Milestones
Week 6 (Apr 7 – Apr 13)	Finalise focus group scheduling frameworks; Develop and align focus group outreach communications	Submit focus group materials to AHRC; Coordinate messaging with the Commission for outreach; Scheduling framework for focus groups done	**11 Apr**: Stakeholder interviews complete FG materials submitted to AHRC Comms aligned with AHRC
Week 7 (Apr 14 – Apr 20)	Launch recruitment and participant scheduling	Launch portals and comms; Begin participant scheduling and facilitator briefings	**17 Apr**: Final Project Management Plan Recruitment and promotion launched
Week 8 (Apr 21 – Apr 27)	Prepare facilitation and support services	Deliver facilitator training; Confirm referral pathways and logistics	Facilitators trained; Support services finalised
Weeks 9–13 (May 5 – Jun 13)	Conduct focus groups and begin transcription	Run online and in-person focus groups; Begin transcription and preliminary coding	**13 Jun**: Focus groups complete
Weeks 14–16 (Jun 16 – Jul 11)	Complete transcription and thematic analysis	Conduct thematic analysis and cross-referencing with survey findings; Feed results to AHRC as they become available during the project meetings; Member checking	**11 Jul**: Qualitative analysis complete

Week	Priorities	Activities	Deliverables / Milestones
Weeks 17–18 (Jul 14 – Jul 25)	Draft and review interim outcomes report	Circulate report for feedback and review with the Commission	**18 Jul**: Draft Interim Outcomes Report submitted **31 Jul:** Feedback from AHRC
Weeks 19–22 (Jul 28 – Aug 18)	Incorporate feedback and finalise reporting	Edit and format final report for submission	**18 Aug**: Final Outcomes Report submitted

4. Risk management

For this Project, risks will occur in two main domains – project delivery and during the implementation of focus groups.

Key project delivery dependencies and risk mitigation

Table 7 presents the main project delivery risks and our approach to mitigating them.

Table 7 | Project delivery risks and mitigation.

Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Low participation in focus groups	Multi-channel recruitment, direct invitations, peer referrals.
Confidentiality breaches	Secure data handling, anonymised transcripts, no personal data storage.
Scheduling conflicts	Flexible timing, online alternatives, rolling invitations.

The Project team will proactively address key dependencies and potential risks to ensure smooth project execution, including:

- Staggered approach to accommodate different ethics approval timelines.
- Flexible scheduling to accommodate university calendars.
- Built-in contingency time for recruitment challenges.
- Parallel preparation activities during ethics review periods.
- Multiple recruitment channels ready to activate upon approval.

Risk management during focus group implementation

We recognise that experiences of racism can be complex and intersectional and can, at times, be complicated by intra-community conflicts. We acknowledge particular sensitivities, including the diverse experiences within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, including those affected by legacies and ongoing policies of forced child removal, including the Stolen Generation; country of origin, cultural and political differences within Muslim and Jewish communities; ethnic diversity among Asian students; diversity among international students. We also acknowledge complexity, power dynamics and potential for lateral violence within all groups and note university cultures, hierarchies and complexity can also affect staff groups. Our risk management approach accounts for these complexities, while also recognising that this Project focuses on institutional and structural racism.

Table 8 outlines our comprehensive approach to ensuring ethical and effective engagement while prioritising participant well-being and data quality. The strategy maintains flexibility to adapt to emerging needs while ensuring consistent quality across all engagement channels. The risk mitigation strategies below will be reviewed and refined for cultural safety and appropriateness during the stakeholder consultations.

Table 8 | Risk management framework for ensuring ethical conduct.

Risk	Mitigation strategy
Online groups are disrupted by a participant	• Pre-forum registration and preparation • Remind the group and the person about the rules for participation and encourage positive participation • If the issue persists, remove the person from the forum and send them a follow-up email with support services • Check in with the wider group and then proceed with the session
In-person forum is disrupted	• Pre-forum registration and preparation • Remind the group and the person about the rules for participation and encourage positive participation • If the issue persists, ask the person disrupting to leave, one facilitator accompanies them out and checks on wellbeing, then we send them a follow-up email with support services • If they refuse to leave, close the session and provide follow-up support to all participants • If they leave, pause and check in with the wider group and then proceed with the session if participants feel safe to do so
Insufficient representation	• Recruitment process developed through the stakeholder co-design sessions and reviewed/endorsed by the Ethics Centre • Recruitment via multiple channels, including universities, societies, market research company, social media advertisements, website • Options for participation, including online, in person, via submission and 1:1 • Careful selection of groups based on a careful sampling model
Cultural safety in fora	• Diverse team including peer facilitators for all fora • Team is experienced in facilitating fora on highly sensitive topics with marginalised and intersectional population groups
Participant distress	• All facilitators are experienced with trauma-informed facilitation • A distress protocol will be developed and reviewed/endorsed by the governance group • Preparation of all participants prior to fora including information about the process and approach, rules of participation and links to support services • Communication regarding self-care, only discussing what feels safe and signaling distress if the participant is experiencing it, with capacity for individual one-on-one immediate or follow-up debriefing

Risk	Mitigation strategy
Intra-group dynamics and conflicts	• Pre-session screening to identify potential conflicts, option to split groups into separate focus groups or breakout groups • Clear communication on rules of participation • Pro-active response from facilitators, explicitly referencing the undertakings given, regarding respectful interaction and participant safety • If people are feeling uncomfortable then alternative participation options will be offered
Access to support	• A list of appropriate support services will be available for participants including crisis support, counselling, cultural networks/support • Support staff will be available before, during and after each forum to provide immediate support for distressed people and to make appropriate referrals where needed
Confidentiality/data security	• No personal information will be collected. All data will be deidentified and securely stored in compliance with TCR data management policy and governance group recommendations • The consent form asks the participants to confirm that they also commit to the non-disclosure of other participants' personal data or opinions expressed during the focus group.

Appendix 1 – Detailed breakdown of focus groups

This appendix outlines the rationale and methodology behind the selection of focus groups to ensure comprehensive representation and thematic saturation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Muslim, Jewish, Middle Eastern, Asian, African, Pacifica and South Sea Islander, international, and intersectional populations. The approach strategically addresses 31 of the 43 universities in Australia, while acknowledging key population concentrations, geographic diversity, and the unique experiences of both students and staff in the Australian university sector.

Participants representing the remainder of universities might be included as part of the national focus groups. **Note: The approach for each group will be further refined and is subject to change depending on the insights from stakeholder co-design interviews.**

Student focus groups

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (3 groups)

- 1 NSW group, targeting The University of New England, Southern Cross University, The University of Newcastle, The University of Wollongong and Western Sydney University, but also reaching out to seek input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the University of Sydney.
- 1 Queensland and Northern Territory group, targeting Central Queensland University, James Cook University, Queensland University of Technology,

Griffith University and Charles Darwin University, but also reaching out to seek input from Indigenous students at the University of Queensland.

- 1 on-site focus group in WA for Curtin University and Edith Cowan University.

Rationale: NSW and Queensland, respectively, account for 33% and 25% of the total commencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australia. Many of the universities selected, including those in WA and NT, also have a high participation rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.[33] It is also important to seek input from Indigenous students at two of the Go8 universities, who may have different experiences.

Jewish, Muslim and Asian students

Metropolitan centres (Sydney/Melbourne - 6 groups)

The publicly available data indicates a strong concentration of Jewish, Muslim and Asian populations in major cities. We therefore suggest conducting cross-university, city-based focus groups for these population groups.

1. Jewish students (2 groups)

- 1 Melbourne group, drawing from universities including Monash University, University of Melbourne and Swinburne University.
- 1 Sydney group, drawing from universities including UNSW, UTS and Macquarie University.
- Rationale: 86% of Australian Jews reside in Victoria and NSW, with a population that is highly urbanised and concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney.[34]

2. Muslim and/or Middle Eastern students (2 groups)

- 1 Melbourne group, drawing from metropolitan universities including Victoria University, University of Melbourne and La Trobe University.
- 1 Sydney group, drawing from universities including UTS, the University of Sydney, and Western Sydney University.
- Rationale: NSW and Victoria are home to 77% of Muslim Australians. Of these, 78.3% of the population concentrates in Sydney and Melbourne.[35]

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[33] Department of Education. "2022 Section 16 Equity performance data". https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2022-section-16-equity-performance-data

[34] Dr David Graham, "The Jewish population of Australia, key findings from the 2021 Census", 2024, The Jewish Council of Australia, https://jca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/The-Jewish-Population-of-Australia-Report_2021-Census-1.pdf

[35] University of South Australia, "Australian Muslims: The challenge of Islamophobia and social distance", 2018, australian-muslims-final-report-web-nov-26.pdf

3. Asian students (2 groups)

- 1 Melbourne group, drawing from universities including Monash University, University of Melbourne and RMIT.
- 1 Sydney group, drawing from universities including the University of Sydney, Macquarie University, and Australian Catholic University.
- Rationale: similarly, Asian and Asian Australian communities predominantly live in NSW and Victoria, especially Sydney and Melbourne.

Regional and state-specific focus (5 groups)

To capture the voices of regional populations of these students, the following groups are proposed:

1. Jewish students (1 group)

- 1 Queensland group, drawing from universities such as The University of Queensland and Bond University.
- Rationale: Queensland represents the fourth largest Australian state in terms of Jewish population and has experienced significant inter-state migration in recent years, resulting in a 6.8% net increase of Jewish population between 2016 and 2021.[36]

2. Muslim students (1 group)

- Charles Sturt University and Australian National University.
- Rationale: Both universities host strong Islamic studies programs and well-established student communities.

3. Asian students (1 group):

- Combined online group for WA and SA universities, including students from The University of Western Australia, Murdoch University, Flinders University and The University of Adelaide.
- Rationale: These two states host some of the largest Asian populations outside NSW and Victoria.

4. African students (1 group):

- Combined online group from universities across all states, including UOS, UNSW, UTS, Macquarie, RMIT, Monash, La Trobe, Deakin, UoM, UQ, GU, JCU, Flinders, UniAdelaide, UniSA, Curtin, Murdoch, UTAS, CDU, ANU.
- Rationale: Student society activity across universities, geographical representation, and institutional diversity.

[36] Dr David Graham, "The Jewish population of Australia, key findings from the 2021 Census", 2024, The Jewish Council of Australia, https://jca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/The-Jewish-Population-of-Australia-Report_2021-Census-1.pdf

5. Pacifica and South Sea Islander students (1 group):

- Combined online group including students from James Cook and Central Queensland universities, the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, and Griffith University, Australian National University (which has a historic mandate, reflected in the College of Asian and the Pacific) and Western Sydney University.
- Rationale: The highest population distribution and/or tailored programs and historical relevance.

National online groups (4 groups)

To ensure comprehensive geographic coverage and representation of populations in areas with smaller concentrations, we will also organise cross-university online groups with:

- Two groups for international students: While international students can also participate in focus groups relevant to their cultural backgrounds, these two groups will address the experiences of international students specifically, creating a safe and open environment.
- Two intersectional groups: For staff and student participants with intersectional identities across various cohorts.

These groups will:

- Enable participation from smaller or geographically dispersed populations.
- Validate findings from location-specific groups.
- Provide a culturally safe and anonymous space for sharing experiences.
- Capture intersectional experiences across multiple identities.

Staff focus groups

National online groups (8 groups)

- 2 groups each for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Jewish, Muslim and/or Middle Eastern, and various cohorts of Asian staff.
- Where possible, splitting in terms of sub-cohorts, e.g., Southeast Asian / East Asian, will be prioritised. For the staff groups where that is less relevant, e.g., Jewish, the groups will be split between academic and professional staff to account for potential power dynamics and ensure diverse perspectives are captured.

Table 9 presents a complete list of focus groups to be implemented during this project.

Table 9 | A list of all focus groups.

No.	Group	Location	Onsite/Online	Target Universities	Rationale
1	Student - Indigenous	NSW	Online	The University of New England, Southern Cross University, The University of Newcastle, The University of Wollongong, Western Sydney University, University of Sydney	NSW accounts for a significant proportion of Indigenous student enrolment. This group ensures coverage of regional and urban experiences.
2	Student - Jewish	Sydney	Onsite ?	UNSW, UTS, Macquarie University	Sydney is home to one of the largest Jewish populations in Australia, with these universities having notable Jewish student populations.
3	Student - Muslim	Sydney	Onsite ?	University of Sydney, Western Sydney University	Sydney has a significant Muslim student population. These universities are key hubs for Muslim communities.
4	Student - Asian	Sydney	Onsite ?	University of Sydney, Macquarie University, Australian Catholic University	Asian student population is concentrated in Sydney, particularly in these institutions.
5	Student - Jewish	Melbourne	Onsite ?	Monash University, University of Melbourne, Swinburne University	Melbourne has the largest Jewish population in Australia, with a strong presence in these universities.

No.	Group	Location	Onsite/Online	Target Universities	Rationale
6	Student - Muslim	Melbourne	Onsite?	Victoria University, University of Melbourne, La Trobe University	Melbourne has a large Muslim community, and these universities have active Muslim student groups.
7	Student - Asian	Melbourne	Onsite?	Monash University, University of Melbourne, RMIT	High concentration of Asian students in Victoria, particularly in these institutions.
8	Student - Jewish	QLD	Onsite?	The University of Queensland, Bond University	Queensland's Jewish population is growing, and these universities have notable Jewish student representation.
9	Student - Indigenous	QLD + NT	Online	Central Queensland University, James Cook University, Queensland University of Technology, Griffith University, Charles Darwin University, University of Queensland	Covers both urban and regional Indigenous experiences, with significant Indigenous student populations in QLD and NT.
10	Student - Muslim	ACT	Online	Charles Sturt University, Australian National University	Includes universities with strong Islamic studies programs and active Muslim student associations.
11	Student - Indigenous	WA	Onsite	Curtin University, Edith Cowan University	WA has a high proportion of Indigenous students, and these universities play a significant role in Indigenous higher education.

No.	Group	Location	Onsite/Online	Target Universities	Rationale
12	Student - Asian	WA+SA	Online	The University of Western Australia, Murdoch University, Flinders University, The University of Adelaide	These states host some of the largest Asian student populations outside NSW and VIC.
13	Student - International	National	Online	Multiple universities	International students face unique barriers to inclusion and racism, requiring dedicated discussion spaces.
14	Student - International	National	Online	Multiple universities	A second group ensures broad representation of international students across different demographics.
15	Student - Intersectional	National	Online	Multiple universities	Focuses on students facing multiple forms of discrimination (e.g., racial, gender, disability).
16	Student - Intersectional	National	Online	Multiple universities	A second group ensures broader coverage of intersectional experiences across different university settings.
17	Staff - Indigenous	National	Online	Multiple universities	Indigenous university staff face unique barriers in academic and professional roles, requiring dedicated discussion.

No.	Group	Location	Onsite/Online	Target Universities	Rationale
18	Staff - Indigenous	National	Online	Multiple universities	A second group ensures diverse representation across regional and urban contexts.
19	Staff - Jewish	National	Online	Multiple universities	Jewish staff have reported a significant rise in antisemitism, requiring a safe discussion space.
20	Staff - Jewish	National	Online	Multiple universities	A second group ensures comprehensive coverage of Jewish staff experiences across institutions.
21	Staff - Muslim	National	Online	Multiple universities	Muslim staff experience specific challenges related to religious discrimination and institutional racism.
22	Staff - Muslim	National	Online	Multiple universities	A second group allows for greater thematic saturation and depth in analysis.
23	Staff – Asian (South/South East Asian)	National	Online	Multiple universities	Asian staff often experience racial discrimination and barriers to career progression, necessitating focused discussions.
24	Staff – Asian	National	Online	Multiple universities	A second group ensures adequate representation across

No.	Group	Location	Onsite/Online	Target Universities	Rationale
	(East Asian/Southeast Asian)				disciplines and university settings.
25	Student – African	National	Online	UOS, UNSW, UTS, Macquarie, RMIT, Monash, La Trobe, Deakin, UoM, UQ, GU, JCU, Flinders, UniAdelaide, UniSA, Curtin, Murdoch, UTAS, CDU, ANU.	Presence of active African Student Societies, geographical coverage of all states and various university types, including regional campuses.
26	Student – Pacifica and South Sea Islander	National	Online	James Cook and Central Queensland universities, the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, Griffith University, Australian National University and Western Sydney University.	Covers the concentration of student population and/or specialised programs and historical relevance for the communities.

Appendix E – Co-design session facilitators' kit

Quick checklist for focus group co-design stakeholder interviews

✅ **Before the interview**

☐ Review the Interview Guide and prepare your approach.
☐ Ensure you have a quiet, confidential space for the interview.
☐ Log stakeholder details in the Contact Log.

✅ **During the interview**

☐ Check that the stakeholder understands the purpose of the interview (use the consent script).
☐ Follow the Interview Guide.
☐ Take notes in the Interview Summary Form.

✅ **After the interview**

☐ Summarise key points in the Interview Summary Form.
☐ Update the Contact Log with interview outcomes.
☐ Identify any follow-ups or recruitment opportunities.
☐ Send the follow-up email, if relevant.
☐ Send the forms to team members after each engagement!

Stakeholder interview guide

Interview script

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

(Introduce yourself)

The project is part of an AHRC project looking at racism on Australian university campuses.

We are doing one part of that project – running some focus groups to get first-hand experience accounts of specific communities through focus groups and an online option.

AHRC has also done its own consulting and has a group at ANU doing a quantitative survey. The AHRC will pull it all together.

We are running groups for groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Jewish, Middle East, Muslim, Asian, African, Pasifika and international students and, groups of staff.

Context

At this stage, we are not discussing content. We are conducting interviews with key expert stakeholders like you to help co-design focus groups and improve outreach for our project.

This conversation will help us:

- Identify key considerations for focus group design
- Gather insights on outreach and recruitment strategies
- Understand any concerns or barriers that may impact participation

Consent

Thanks for joining us for this chat. You can choose to stop it at any time of course. The information you provide will be recorded in summary form without identifying you personally.

We will take notes, but your name and any identifying details will not be included in the eventual report.

Can we proceed?
(*Wait for verbal confirmation before continuing.*)

Interview questions

Introduction and understanding perspective

1. Can you tell us about your role and how it relates to the experiences of the group of students and staff we are talking about?

Design of focus groups

2. Our first interest is in how we design and facilitate focus groups. Is there anything specific we should consider, given your knowledge of the group you know?
    - Are there particular kinds of questions you would suggest we ask – eg because of what you know they are thinking about?
    - Or because everyone assumes they know, or some other work has told us some of the picture, but we don't know about some questions?

Recruitment

3. What are the best ways to reach potential participants from the group you know?
    - Do you know of any people, organisations, or networks we should engage with?
    - Are there particular social media channels or word of mouth channels?
4. Are there any potential barriers to participation that we should be aware of? How can we address these?

Risk Management & Support

5. How can we ensure that participants feel comfortable & safe sharing their experiences?
    - Are there any specific referral services or support networks that we should make available to participants?

Closing

6. Would you be open to assisting with outreach or recommending others who could help?

- Thank for participation
- Confirm the follow up and action points, if any

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Q: Can I withdraw my participation later?

A: Yes, you can withdraw at any time before the analysis stage.

Q: How will the insights from this interview be used in the project?

A: The feedback will directly inform focus group design, recruitment strategies, and risk management protocols. A summary of key themes will be compiled to ensure stakeholder input shapes the study.

Q: Will I receive a summary of findings?

A: If you want to, we can share a high-level summary of themes emerging from the stakeholder interviews. Participants can also request updates on the broader study outcomes.

Q: How are you ensuring participant safety during focus groups?

A: We are implementing a trauma-informed approach, which means recognising that participants may have first-hand experiences of racism and ensuring that discussions do not re-traumatise them. This includes:

- using facilitators trained in recognising distress,
- providing clear options for participants to step away from discussions if needed
- offering post-session support
- establishing clear guidelines for respectful dialogue in the beginning
- ensure that participants know they can contribute at their own comfort level
- referral services will be available for those who need additional support.

Q: How will you ensure the rigour of methods and respect for participants' experiences?

A: The focus groups will follow structured, ethical research practices that ensure accuracy and depth in data collection. Facilitators will use standardised question frameworks while allowing flexibility for participants to share their experiences in their own terms. Data will be analysed using systematic thematic coding to ensure patterns and insights are captured reliably. We will cross-check findings through member validation, where participants can review preliminary themes to ensure their perspectives have been represented accurately. Confidentiality and ethical considerations will be prioritised at every stage, ensuring that participant voices are not misrepresented or taken out of context.

Q: How will you ensure diversity in participant recruitment?

A: We are using multiple recruitment channels, including university networks, community organisations, and targeted outreach to ensure broad representation. We will also work with trusted intermediaries and student-led organisations to reach underrepresented groups.

Q: What steps are being taken to ensure confidentiality in focus groups?

A: Participants' identities will not be recorded, and all findings will be anonymised. Ground rules will be set at the beginning of each session to ensure a safe and private discussion space.

Q: How will power dynamics be managed in focus groups?

A: We will:

- separate students and staff where needed
- ensure diverse facilitation teams who can navigate sensitivities
- use techniques such as small breakout discussions
- use open-ended screening questions to ensure we don't encounter within group issues.

But any further suggestions and feedback are welcome.

Q: What happens if a participant becomes distressed during a focus group?

A: Facilitators are trained in trauma-informed approaches and will provide options for participants to step away if needed. Support resources will be available, and participants can access referral services after the session.

Stakeholder contact log

Instructions

- Complete this log for every stakeholder interaction (email, phone call, in-person, or virtual meeting).
- Update follow-ups if further engagement is required.
- Record key takeaways briefly to avoid duplication in later discussions.

Contact log template

Date	Stakeholder Name & Organisation	Role	Method of Contact (Email/Phone/In-person/Online)	Status (Schedule an interview/Interview/Follow up)	What Was Discussed?	Follow-up Actions (if needed)	Next Step Deadline
DD/MM/YYYY	[Name] – [Organisation]	[Role]	[Email/Phone/In-person/Online]	[Schedule an interview/Interview/Follow up]	[Summary of discussion points]	[E.g., schedule follow-up, send additional materials, no action needed]	[Date for next action]

Date	Stakeholder Name & Organisation	Role	Method of Contact (Email/Phone/In-person/Online)	Status (Schedule an interview/Interview/Follow up)	What Was Discussed?	Follow-up Actions (if needed)	Next Step Deadline

Interview summary form

Instructions

- Complete this form for every stakeholder interview to maintain consistency in documentation.
- Summarise key insights rather than transcribing the entire conversation.
- Send the table to team members after each engagement

Interview summary template

Date	Stakeholder Name & Organisation	Role	Method of Interview (Phone/Online/In-person)	Views on the Problem	Focus Group Design Suggestions	Recruitment Insights	Risk Management & Support Considerations	Important other points	Follow-up Actions
DD/MM/YYYY	[Name] – [Organisation]	[Role]	[Phone/Online/In-person]	[Summary of key challenges and suggested solutions]	[Suggestions for structure, facilitation, or topics]	[Best ways to reach participants]	[Challenges, concerns, or participant safety considerations]	[Any other interesting insights from the interview]	[Next steps, if any]

Appendix F – Focus group facilitator kit

Facilitator's Kit

Racism@Uni qualitative study of experience of racism and discrimination at Australian universities

02/05/2025

Think Change Resolve

Langton & Partners

Overview of This Document

This guide is intended as a resource to support facilitators to run focus groups as part of the *Racism@Uni qualitative study of experience of racism and discrimination at Australian universities* project.

Project Team Protocols

1. Focus Group Discussion Topics

The following topics serve as a guide rather than a strict list of questions. Not all questions may be asked, as facilitators will adapt the discussion based on participant comfort, engagement, and the natural flow of conversation. The aim is to create an open and supportive space where participants can share as much or as little as they choose.

1. Welcome and Introduction (5 mins)

- Acknowledgment of Country
- Introduction of facilitators and purpose of the session. Whip around group for names, if one of smaller groups or ask people to say name and where from first time they talk.
- Explanation of discussion structure and key ethical principles (confidentiality, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, support options)
- Ground rules: Respectful dialogue, we want our chance to have individual views again, let's respect them here, listening to others, avoiding re-traumatisation
- One of the pieces of feedback we got in the co-design sessions is that for Jewish people (interestingly also for some other groups) was that point that likely some Jewish students and staff might not associate some discriminatory experiences they have with the word 'racism'. Please share – we will think hard and honour all we hear.

2. Understanding Everyday Experiences of Racism (20 mins)

- What does racism look like in university settings?
- Have you experienced or witnessed racism on campus?
- What are the common forms of racism (e.g., direct discrimination, microaggressions, institutional policies, exclusion, stereotyping)?
- Are there particular spaces (e.g., lecture halls, student services, social settings, research environments) where racism is more evident?

3. Institutional and Structural Racism (20 mins)

- How does racism manifest at a systemic level in universities (e.g., curriculum, leadership, policies, reporting systems)?
- What barriers exist for students and staff from religious, ethnic, and culturally diverse communities in achieving success and feeling included?
- How do university policies or practices contribute to or fail to address racism?
- Have there been any recent events or broader social issues that have influenced racism in universities?

4. Reporting and Addressing Racism

- Have you or someone you know attempted to report an incident of racism? What was your experience with university reporting mechanisms (e.g., support services, disciplinary procedures, anonymity concerns)?
- What are the barriers to reporting racism?
- How could universities improve their processes for addressing racism?

5. Emotional and Academic/Professional Impact (15 mins)

- How has racism affected your well-being, sense of belonging, and/or academic or professional journey?
- How do experiences of racism intersect with other aspects of identity (e.g., gender, disability, socio-economic background, faith)?
- Have you received adequate support from university services or peers in navigating these experiences?

6. Pathways for Change and Solutions (25 mins)

- What does a culturally safe and inclusive university look like to you? What would make you feel more supported?
- What actions should universities take to prevent and respond to racism effectively?
- Are there examples of good practices (either within or outside your institution) that have made a difference?

7. Closing and Next Steps (5 mins)

- Summary of key themes discussed (facilitators to recap and explicitly ask if that interpretation corresponds to what they have shared)
- Invitation for final reflections: Is there anything else you want to share?
- Information on follow-up support services available
- Thanking participants and explaining how findings will contribute to policy improvements

2. Distress Protocol for Focus Groups

This protocol provides a structured response to support participants who experience emotional distress during focus group discussions on racism in universities. It ensures the safety, well-being, and cultural appropriateness of support provided to affected individuals.

1. Pre-Session Preparation

- Facilitators will receive training in trauma-informed practices and cultural safety.
- A distress management plan, including a list of culturally appropriate support services, will be in place.
- Participants will be informed in advance about the nature of discussions and available support options.
- Participants will have the option to opt out or take breaks as needed.

2. Identifying Signs of Distress

Facilitators will monitor for signs of distress, including but not limited to:

- Sudden withdrawal from discussion or silence
- Visible emotional reactions (tears, trembling, rapid breathing)
- Expressions of feeling unsafe or overwhelmed
- Requesting to leave the session

3. Immediate Response during the Session

If a participant appears distressed, facilitators will:

1) Acknowledge and Validate:
   - Gently acknowledge their distress (e.g., "I see that this discussion may be difficult for you. Would you like a break?").
2) Offer Immediate Support:
   - Provide the participant an opportunity to pause (including an offer to move to another physical or virtual location) or leave the session temporarily or entirely.
   - Offer access to a designated support person if available.
3) Ensure Safety and Comfort:
   - Provide a quiet, private space for participants needing time out (for in-person sessions) or a breakout room in online sessions.
   - Assign a facilitator or support staff to privately check in with the individual. These staff will not be counsellors. They will offer immediate support, including information about appropriate support services and assistance with access.

4) Respect Personal Boundaries:

- Do not pressure the participant to share more than they are comfortable with.
- Allow them to decide whether they wish to rejoin the discussion.

4. Post-Session Support

- Provide participants with information on available support services, including:
  - University counselling and wellbeing services
  - External culturally appropriate mental health and trauma support services
  - Community-based cultural and faith-based support groups

5. Confidentiality and Documentation

- Discussions of distress incidents will remain confidential.
- No personal information will be recorded.

6. Handling Escalated Situations

If a participant experiences extreme distress or expresses thoughts of harm, facilitators will:

- Stay calm and supportive, ensuring the participant is not alone.
- Assist the participant in connecting with professional support services.
- If necessary, contact emergency mental health services.

7. Cultural and Trauma-Informed Considerations

- Ensure all support provided is culturally safe and trauma-informed.
- Where relevant, offer the option of speaking to a facilitator or support person of the participant's cultural background.
- Avoid re-traumatising language or actions, and respect individual coping mechanisms.

3. Support services

Table 1: Support services for focus group participants

Type of support	Service	Contact details	Notes
Crisis support	Lifeline	13 11 14 www.lifeline.org.au	24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention.

Type of support	Service	Contact details	Notes
	13YARN	13 92 76 www.13yarn.org.au	24/7 support by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
	Beyond Blue	1300 22 4636 www.beyondblue.org.au	Mental health support with access to culturally responsive practitioners.
	QLife	1800 184 527 www.qlife.org.au	Support for LGBTIQ+ communities. 3pm–midnight.
University-specific support	University counselling and wellbeing services	Refer to each participant's university	Each university has a counselling and wellbeing centre. Participants should be reminded these services are free and confidential.

4. Ethical Protocol for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

This protocol outlines the ethical considerations and procedures to ensure culturally safe, respectful, and equitable engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during focus-group-based consultations. It implements the **NHMRC's six core values** through specific actions and commitments:

1. Spirit and Integrity

The project will uphold the integrity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and promote continuity across generations. To achieve this, our consultation team will:

- Share all project materials, drafts, and findings with Indigenous advisors before wider circulation.
- Document and act upon Indigenous feedback throughout the project process.

- Form an Indigenous Advisory Group with a minimum of 3 representatives for member checking of data and interpretation of results.
- Involve Indigenous leadership in decision-making.
- Share project objectives, methodologies, and findings openly with Indigenous participants and stakeholders.

2. Cultural Continuity

Cultural traditions, governance, and knowledge systems must be recognised and respected in all aspects of the project. To achieve this, our consultation team will:

- Begin focus groups with a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgment of Country as appropriate.
- Schedule sessions at times and locations determined in consultation with Indigenous participants.
- Include yarning circles and narrative approaches in focus group methodology.

3. Equity

To ensure fairness and justice, the project will actively counter systemic inequalities. To achieve this, our consultation team will:

- Employ Indigenous facilitators to lead focus groups where possible.
- Ensure balanced representation across age, gender, and community groups.
- Address practical barriers to participation (transportation, mode of participation, timing).
- Co-design project outputs with Indigenous partners to ensure relevance to community needs.

4. Reciprocity

The Project will be a mutually beneficial process, not extractive. To achieve this, our consultation team will:

- Fully inform the participants about the project, including risks, benefits, and intended outcomes, ensuring the concept of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) is enacted in the focus groups. Importantly, the focus groups and information about the project will include participant responsibility for the information they share, including the responsibility to only share community knowledge they are authorised to share.
- Recognise the knowledge holders and acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions where appropriate, noting that most contributions will be de-identified.

- Student participants will receive a $50 voucher as a small token of appreciation for their contribution.

5. Respect

Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be embedded throughout the project process. This includes:

- Ensuring participants feel safe to share their experiences and perspectives without fear of discrimination or harm by having processes led by Aboriginal people. All non-Indigenous support staff will have completed cultural respect training.
- Data will be collected, stored, and reported in ways that protect participants' identities and cultural knowledge.
- Conflict resolution mechanisms that respect cultural authority.

6. Responsibility

All TCR and Langton and Partners consultants are responsible for ensuring their work does no harm and contributes positively to the communities involved. In this project, this means:

- Risk management through identifying potential harms and establishing culturally appropriate distress protocols.
- Ethical oversight through seeking input from Indigenous experts and the Ethics Centre.

5. Data Protocol

The following section outlines the data management protocols for the project. It establishes guidelines for data collection, storage, handling, and protection to ensure confidentiality, security, and ethical compliance throughout the process.

1. Data Collection

Types of Data Collected:

- Qualitative data from stakeholder consultations/co-design sessions.
- Qualitative data from focus groups.
- Anonymous written submissions.
- Supplementary field notes from facilitators (non-identifiable observations).

Informed Consent:

- All participants will receive clear information on the purpose of data collection, confidentiality, and their rights before participating.
- Consent will be obtained prior to participation.

- Participants will have the right to withdraw their consent up to the point of participation without explanation or penalty (after that point, their data will be unidentifiable).
- The highest level of informed consent will be applied across all groups to ensure participants fully understand their contributions and the implications of their participation. Informed consent in this project is not treated as a one-time procedural formality but as an ongoing process shaped by:
    - Participant agency and choice: Individuals will choose the method, timing, and extent of their engagement—including group participation, written submission, and modes of expression (verbal, written, silent presence).
    - Intra-community dynamics: We acknowledge that for some participants, their community membership or public association with the Project may have implications beyond the focus group. Participants will be advised that the project team cannot manage community relationships on their behalf; we will provide clear information about the nature of participation so they can make fully informed decisions about their involvement.
    - Safety and transparency: Participants will be given opportunities to flag concerns in the registration process, including preferences about who they do or do not wish to be grouped with. We will not share this information with others but will use it to make ethically sound group composition decisions.
    - Real-time validation: As we are not collecting personal identifiers, we ensure accuracy and respect in representation by verifying meaning and language during sessions. Facilitators will use gentle check-ins and reflective listening to confirm how participants want their experiences and perspectives to be understood.

Recording and Transcription:

- Consultations/co-design sessions and focus groups may be audio-recorded with prior consent.
- Automated or manual transcription will be used to generate anonymised notes.
- Audio recordings will be destroyed once de-identified transcripts are finalised.

2. Data Storage and Security

Storage Location:

- All data will be stored in a secure, password-protected, cloud-based system with multi-factor authentication and available only to authorised team members.

Data Anonymisation:

- No personal identifiers will be collected or stored.
- Any indirect identifiers (e.g., university names, specific roles) removed to maintain anonymity. Focus groups will be assigned a number with the characteristics of the group (e.g., 010105 urban university + academic staff + intersectional identity).

Retention and Disposal:

- Raw data will be retained securely for the duration of the project.
- Upon project completion, all identifying information will be permanently deleted in accordance with data protection policies.
- Deidentified data may be retained for archival purposes.

3. Data Access and Confidentiality

Access Control:

- Only authorised project personnel will have access to raw data.
- Data sharing with external parties will only occur in an aggregated, deidentified format.
- All external participants will be given the same level of control over their data.

Confidentiality Measures:

- Participants' identities will not be disclosed in any reports or publications.
- Facilitators will sign confidentiality agreements before handling data.
- Data breaches, if any, will be reported immediately to the AHRC, and mitigation measures will be enacted.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Thematic Analysis:

- Data will be analysed using inductive thematic analysis.
- Analysis will be conducted by at least two team members, with one having lived experience relevant to the project.
- Patterns, themes, and key insights will be validated through stakeholder review.

Member Checking:

- Member checking will be built into the focus group discussions by paraphrasing and confirming interpretations in real-time.
- A summary of key findings will be shared with stakeholders for feedback and checking for accuracy and completeness.

5. Reporting and Publication

Reporting Principles:

- Findings will be presented in a deidentified, aggregated manner.
- The final report will include thematic insights and recommendations without exposing participant details.

Data Use Limitations:

- Data will be used solely for this project.

6. Compliance with Ethical and Legal Standards

Ethical Oversight:

- The project will adhere to human rights principles.
- The Ethics Centre will advise on the ethical framework and approach to the project.

Privacy and Legal Considerations:

- The project will comply with Australian privacy laws and the Australian Human Rights Commission's data protection guidelines.
- Participants will be informed of their rights under data privacy regulations.

Documents for the Focus Group Participants

6. Code of Conduct (given to participants)

This Code of Conduct outlines the expectations for all participants in the focus groups. It establishes clear guidelines for respectful engagement, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity to create a safe, respectful, and inclusive space where participants can share their experiences and insights freely.

All participants will read and agree to follow the Code of Conduct before participating in the focus groups.

1. Respect and Inclusion

- Treat all participants with dignity, respect, and kindness.

- Listen actively and allow others to express their views without interruption.
- Refrain from using offensive, discriminatory, or derogatory language.
- Be mindful of different cultural perspectives and lived experiences.

2. Confidentiality, Privacy, and Informed Consent

- Respect the confidentiality of all discussions.
- Do not disclose any personal stories, identities, or experiences shared within the focus group outside of the session.
- Avoid recording or taking notes that include identifying information of other participants.
- If you are concerned about group composition, you may raise this by emailing us before the session.
- We recognise that your participation may have implications within your own community. You are responsible for considering and managing those implications.

3. Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness

- Be aware of and respect cultural differences and sensitivities.
- Avoid making assumptions about others' experiences or identities.
- Use inclusive language that acknowledges diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

4. Safe and Supportive Environment

- Engage in discussions in a manner that promotes a safe space for all participants.
- If a participant feels distressed, they are encouraged to take a break or seek support from designated facilitators.
- Disruptive or aggressive behaviour will not be tolerated and may result in removal from the focus group.

5. Participation and Engagement

- Allow everyone an equal opportunity to speak and be heard.
- Engage constructively, providing thoughtful and relevant contributions.
- Respect the facilitators' guidance and direction throughout the session.

6. Trauma-Informed Approach

- Recognise that discussions on racism and discrimination can be triggering for some participants.

- Share experiences at your own comfort level, and do not feel pressured to disclose personal trauma.
- Support services and resources will be available for those who need them after the session.

7. No Harassment or Retaliation

- Harassment, bullying, or retaliatory actions against any participant will not be tolerated.
- Any concerns should be reported to facilitators.

8. Compliance and Agreement

- By participating in the focus group, all participants agree to abide by this Code of Conduct.
- Facilitators reserve the right to take appropriate action, including removal from the session, for violations of this Code.

Appendix G - Expression of interest form

Racism@Uni: A National Study for Change

* Required

Have you experienced racism at an Australian university?

We are inviting students and staff from diverse backgrounds to contribute to a national project examining the prevalence and impact of racism in higher education. You can take part in one of our focus groups—or, if you prefer, submit a written account of your experience anonymously.

Focus groups will be held online or in person between May and June 2025.
Students participating in focus groups will receive a $50 voucher in recognition of their time.
Written submissions can be made securely and anonymously through this form.

Express your interest or submit a written response by clicking "Next" below.

Participation is confidential, and no personally identifiable information will be shared in any reports.
Please note that while we will do our best to accommodate your preference for a focus group, availability is not guaranteed.

About the project

Think Change Resolve is conducting focus groups as part of the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Racism@Uni Study*. This project seeks to explore the experiences, nature, and impact of racism within Australian universities, using focus groups and qualitative analysis. By centring the voices of affected students, former students and staff—including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Jewish, Muslim, Asian, African, Pasifika and Australian South Sea Islanders, and international students —this project aims to inform policy change and foster inclusive and culturally safe university environments. Read more about the project at https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/projects/study-racism-australian-universities.
Your insights will help shape future reforms to make universities safer and more inclusive.

Questions? Contact us at: racismatuni@thinkchangeresolve.com

What do we mean by racism?

This project explores experiences of **racism and related forms of discrimination**, including unfair treatment based on **faith, culture, ethnicity, or perceived background**.

Racism is the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create **inequitable opportunities and outcomes** for people based on race. Racism is more than just prejudice in thought or action. It occurs when this prejudice – whether individual or institutional – is accompanied by the power to **discriminate against, oppress** or **limit the rights** of others.

This project recognises that racism may be experienced in various ways. Below are examples to help illustrate different types of racism:

- **Interpersonal racism:** Bullying, exclusion, or stereotyping based on race or religion. Examples: *A staff member makes repeated jokes about a colleague's accent or appearance, a student is called racial slurs on campus, is ignored in group discussions and assignments, or receives strange looks when speaking another language on campus.*
- **Institutional racism:** Policies, rules, or practices that disadvantage certain groups, even if unintended. Examples: *University support services are not available in languages other than English, or cultural safety training is optional and inconsistently applied.*
- **Structural racism:** The broader system of power, history and social norms that produces and reinforces inequalities across society. *Example: Students from certain backgrounds are underrepresented in leadership roles or postgraduate programs due to long-standing barriers in education and employment.*

We also welcome accounts of interpersonal, institutional, and structural discrimination based on **faith, ethnicity, culture, or perceived background**.

Click "Next" if you have personally experienced racism and/or related forms of discrimination and want to **express your interest in a focus group** or **submit a written response**.

About you

1

Have you personally experienced racism and/or discrimination due to your ethnicity, culture, religion and/or perceived background? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

2

Are you currently enrolled or employed at an Australian university? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

3

If **no**, are you a former student (within the last 3 years)?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

4

What is your role at a university? *

- ◯ Undergraduate student
- ◯ Postgraduate student
- ◯ Recent graduate
- ◯ Academic staff
- ◯ Professional staff
- ◯ Other

5

What is your student status? *

- ◯ Domestic student (Australian citizen or permanent resident)
- ◯ International student (on a student visa)
- ◯ Former international student
- ◯ Other

6

Which university are you currently or were previously affiliated with? *

- ◯ Australian Catholic University
- ◯ Australian National University
- ◯ Bond University
- ◯ Central Queensland University
- ◯ Charles Darwin University
- ◯ Charles Sturt University
- ◯ Curtin University
- ◯ Edith Cowan University
- ◯ Flinders University
- ◯ Griffith University
- ◯ James Cook University
- ◯ La Trobe University
- ◯ Macquarie University
- ◯ Monash University
- ◯ Murdoch University
- ◯ Queensland University of Technology
- ◯ Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
- ◯ Swinburne University
- ◯ The Southern Cross University
- ◯ The University of Adelaide
- ◯ The University of Melbourne
- ◯ The University of Newcastle
- ◯ The University of Sydney
- ◯ The University of Wollongong
- ◯ University of New England
- ◯ University of New South Wales
- ◯ University of Queensland
- ◯ University of Technology Sydney

- ◯ University of Western Australia
- ◯ Victoria University
- ◯ Western Sydney University
- ◯ Other

7

How do you describe your gender? *

- ◯ Man or male
- ◯ Woman or female
- ◯ Non-binary
- ◯ Prefer not to answer
- ◯ Other

8

Are you over 18? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

9

Do you identify with any of the following groups? (Check all that apply) *

- [ ] Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- [ ] Jewish
- [ ] Muslim
- [ ] Arab/Middle Eastern
- [ ] North African
- [ ] Sub-Saharan African
- [ ] South Asian
- [ ] Southeast Asian
- [ ] East Asian
- [ ] Latin American
- [ ] Pasifika
- [ ] Australian South Sea Islanders
- [ ] Other

10

How would you best define your ethnic, cultural or religious background? Feel free to include multiple aspects of your identity - for example, *"Chinese-Australian, born in China", "Indian-Australian, born in Australia", "Muslim-Indonesian, recently immigrated to Australia", etc.* *

11

Do you identify with any of the following intersectional identities? (Check all that apply or click next if not applicable)

- [ ] LGBTQIA+
- [ ] Person with disability
- [ ] Refugee or asylum seeker background
- [ ] Low socio-economic background
- [ ] Religious minority (other than Jewish or Muslim)
- [ ] Other

12

How would you prefer to participate? *

- ◯ Focus group
- ◯ Written submission

Focus groups

13

How comfortable are you discussing your experiences or perspectives in a group setting? *

- ◯ Very comfortable
- ◯ Somewhat comfortable
- ◯ Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- ◯ Somewhat uncomfortable
- ◯ Very uncomfortable

14

We understand that sharing experiences in a group setting can be challenging. We would still be happy to have you participate in a focus group, but if you prefer, you also have the option to submit a written response instead.

Would you like to continue your Expression of Interest (EOI) for a focus group, or would you prefer to submit a written response? *

- ◯ Yes, I would like to continue my EOI for a focus group.
- ◯ No, I would prefer to submit a written response instead.

15

Is there anything that might prevent you from participating freely and comfortably in a focus group? *For example, group size and composition, location, etc.* *

16

How did you hear about this project? *

17

Do you have any accessibility requirements or accommodations that would help you participate comfortably?

18

Please provide your full name. *(This information will be used only for communication related to your participation in this project.)* *

19

Please provide your **student/staff email** so we can send participation details. *(This information will be used only for communication related to your participation in this project.)* *

20

Please note that while we will do our best to accommodate your preference for a focus group, availability is not guaranteed.

Would like to also submit a **written response**? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Written submission

21

Have you experienced racism at an Australian university? Please feel free to elaborate.

22

What challenges or barriers have you faced (or do you perceive) in reporting or addressing racism within your university?

23

How has racism affected your academic progress, professional development, or overall university experience?

24

What changes do you think universities should implement to better prevent, address, and respond to racism on campus?

Thank You for Your Participation!

We appreciate you taking the time to express your interest in this project.

If you are selected to participate in a focus group, we will contact you soon with further details. In the meantime, if you have any questions or need additional information, please feel free to reach out to us at racismatuni@thinkchangeresolve.com.

Please click "Submit" below to finalise your EOI.

Thank you for your interest.

Unfortunately, you do not meet the eligibility criteria for this project.

We appreciate your time and willingness to participate. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at racismatuni@thinkchangeresolve.com.

Appendix H – Summaries of focus groups provided to co-design stakeholders for review

About the summaries

The following summaries were prepared after focus groups and shared with relevant co-design stakeholders. The purpose of this step was to check that the range of issues that came up in our focus groups aligned with the broad expectations of the co-design partners, in order to surface any themes that might be present in community discourse but had not arisen in our focus groups.

This process took place before the analytical stage and was part of the data-gathering process. This was not any form of feedback on our analysis, which had not at that point been undertaken. Stakeholders were being asked to check for resonance and any likely omissions in what we were hearing. An omission could be a sign we had not reached data saturation and needed to talk to more staff or students. It might also be itself a data point, namely that the issue in question is hard for people to talk about for some reason.

The summaries were generally endorsed, with some important comments and suggestions provided; these were considered and, where appropriate, incorporated into our analysis. These summaries are included here for transparency about our process. They should be read as a record of the range of themes we were observing, prior to us undertaking deeper analysis.

These summaries were shared with co-design partners at the community-checking stage, seeking feedback on any themes those experts would have expected to see, or any we observed that were not expected. This feedback then helped our team refine the thematic frameworks that underpinned our deep analysis of the material gathered from participants in our focus groups and the providers of written submissions. They were not themselves summaries of our findings, coming as they did prior to our deep analysis, but they helped us strengthen the basis on which we conducted that analysis.

Summary of Racism@Uni Focus Groups – Indigenous Groups

Between May and June 2025, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the experiences of racism faced by students and staff across Australian universities. These discussions provided valuable and in-depth insights into the ways racism impacts individuals' experiences on campus. This document presents a summary of the key findings from the Indigenous focus groups (FG) and written submissions (WS), organised under four overarching themes: (1)

wellbeing, safety and progression; (2) leadership; (3) policy and systems; and (4) cultural safety and inclusion.

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

Indigenous participants described racism as deeply embedded in the university experience, manifesting as overt and subtle hostility and through institutional neglect. For many, this had lasting effects on mental health and impacted course progression and professional opportunities.

The psychological toll of ongoing exposure to racism was clear. One staff member noted, "It's typically death by a thousand cuts," describing how repeated encounters with racism impacted their wellbeing and their sense of safety in the workplace (FG46). Students also reported this cumulative burden, with one stating, "You are a student, but not a real student; you have to be proud to have an identity intact, but not too proud" (FG49).

Classrooms were mentioned as spaces of anxiety, where students' identity became subject to debate. One student reflected, "is it okay that every time we walk into a classroom that we can be a subject of political debate?" (FG27). In addition, the isolation of being the "only one" in classrooms or faculties compounded this sense of marginalisation.

Staff spoke of significant barriers to career advancement, often tied to their cultural roles within institutions. One academic explained: "We've been employed in positions specifically to deal with colonialism… It comes with a heavy personal cost in the end, and usually to your career" (FG46). Indigenous staff repeatedly described the overburden of being expected to carry cultural responsibilities within universities, often without authority, recognition, or support. Staff were tasked with representing "everything Indigenous," while students were approached to advise on cultural matters or support peers, even at the cost of their own wellbeing and academic progress.

Many Indigenous staff and students also carry a burden arising from an intersecting feature of their lives. Managing these can be harder while also addressing discrimination against Indigenous people. One student disclosed he is autistic and finds himself choosing between asking for the application of reasonable adjustment for his neurodiversity needs or a culturally safe environment. "It's sort of like, I've had my quota of indulgence today and better shut up, even if I'm not coping and closing down..." (FG45).

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in acknowledging and addressing racism and discrimination

Many participants were critical of university leadership, describing it as distant, bureaucratic, and performative when it came to addressing racism. While

diversity rhetoric was common, real accountability and action were not. Participants consistently challenged universities' superficial engagement with Indigenous perspectives. Symbolic gestures, like flag raisings or acknowledgements of country, were seen as hollow without systemic action. Cultural safety training is also seen as performative, as one student shared: school executives "did cultural safety training... and they are pumping themselves up and telling themselves what a good job they're doing with no insight, no critical reflection" (FG55).

Both students and staff had stories of feeling targeted and then left stranded in drawn out university processes, before finally being exonerated in cases that felt to them based in presumptions about their honesty. A student talked about being accused of cheating, even though backed up by their tutor, waiting for a stressful length of time before being exonerated and a staff member told a story about being targeted and subjected to disciplinary procedures that also took a long time, before being dismissed (both FG55).

3. Policies and systems to report and deter racism and discrimination are inadequate

Participants expressed overwhelming distrust in complaints systems, noting that reporting processes were often unsafe, ignored, or retraumatising. The pathways to make complaints were often unclear, bureaucratic, or circular. One student mentioned making "16 complaints, because [they are] sent to people who are about to retire... and told to start the process again" (FG27).

There were consistent concerns about the double burden placed on Indigenous students and staff, as they experience racism and have to educate others or fix the system. One student remarked on having to explain slurs in class while their tutor remained silent: "I'm a student, not my responsibility in calling things that's wrong" (FG49).

Indigenous students reported mixed experiences with university support services, offering praise for individual staff while also critiquing the broader lack of resourcing and institutional will. One student highlighted the over-reliance on a single staff member, stating, "She's sort of the only person who's actually helpful with it... so she gets a bit overworked" (FG27), underscoring the systemic failure to provide adequate infrastructure and shared responsibility.

4. Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

Cultural safety was inconsistently applied, and often absent. Participants described universities as spaces where cultural identity had to be hidden. "It was a common experience to hide your Indigenous identity," one student reflected. "You don't want to be honest about it" (FG49).

Staff and students critiqued how curricula and teaching practices ignored or mishandled Indigenous Knowledges. An academic staff reported that "One particular academic told me that I couldn't use Indigenous knowledges or standpoint in my PhD because there was no such thing as them, and I had to use Western methodologies" (FG3).

Indigenous staff talked about lateral violence and conflicts over identity and control of Aboriginal spaces (FG46) and students talked about the barrier that the proof of Aboriginal identity process can place in the way of students (FG45). These were explained by participants of examples of universities not being sophisticated enough to manage these quite complex and damaging dynamics.

Participants also spoke of tokenistic leadership, often dominated by non-Indigenous staff who lacked the first-hand experience to drive cultural safety. A staff member reported being "constantly told that my concerns were a misinterpretation or misunderstanding, often by non-Indigenous managers" (WS012). Issues with leadership also reflected intra-community dynamics that were often harmful to Indigenous staff and students' inclusion. As described by a staff member, "I have experienced a high level of lateral violence within the Indigenous space at university, and I believe that this violence is perpetuated by Indigenous staff members who are supported by senior management when they engage in this behaviour" (WS030).

Summary of Racism@Uni Focus Groups – Jewish Groups

Between May and June 2025, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the experiences of racism faced by students and staff across Australian universities. These discussions provided valuable and in-depth insights into the ways racism impacts individuals' experiences on campus. This document presents a summary of the key findings from the Jewish focus groups (FG) and written submissions (WS), organised under four overarching themes: (1) wellbeing, safety and progression; (2) leadership; (3) policy and systems; and (4) cultural safety and inclusion.

Jewish students and staff presented a spectrum of views in the focus groups, reflecting divergent experiences and perspectives. Some participants reported distressing and ongoing experiences of microaggressions, exclusion, discrimination, and institutional neglect, others described their time at university as generally positive and inclusive. A student recounted, "the university has proven time and time again, that it is not to be trusted when it comes to the matter of our safety. Both physically and institutionally" (FG20). Yet, another student shared, "I've always been very open about my Judaism, and I've always found the university to be a welcoming place for Jews" (FG43).

Some participants, including students and staff with differing experiences, noted that this reflects a diversity of views in the wider Jewish community, which the current political situation has tended to polarise. Also, that it reflects a diversity of expressions of antisemitism, the experience being neither uniform nor universal. Several Jewish students expressed distress either at their views being assumed as soon as it was known they were Jewish or subjected to a kind of pressure to fall neatly into one or other preset formula. This itself is experienced by some students (with differing perspectives on other issues) as discriminatory.

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

Some Jewish students and staff reported significant emotional and psychological impacts arising from both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, particularly in the wake of the October 7 attacks and subsequent campus protests. These participants often altered their behaviour or appearance to avoid identification as Jewish. One student shared, "I didn't wear a Star of David necklace on campus for over a year, because I just didn't want to be openly identified as a Jewish student" (FG6). Others described the cumulative toll of hypervigilance and fear: "The actual physical impact is, people have hidden their Jewish identity, and they walk on eggshells" (FG6).

Concerns about safety on campus were common. Students reported actively avoiding certain areas: "People literally will... map their class, avoid certain areas of campus to just do that... I literally am like watching... how can I like literally position myself in a way that it's like least observed" (FG06).

Some students and staff reported having their mental health impacted by the ongoing conflict and animosities on campus. One staff member shared "feeling completely exhausted, depleted, out of patience to try and explain again what's been happening to us" (FG02).

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in acknowledging and addressing racism and discrimination

A consistent concern among participants was the perceived inaction of university leadership in protecting the Jewish community but also other groups. One student said that "the university really does not consider Jews to be… a big enough problem for them to do something about it" (FG20). One staff member stated that the kind of things they had heard asserted about Jews would be dealt with if they were said about any other groups with culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds, as they should be, but unlikely to be identified as offensive if said about Jewish people. (FG01)

Some participants described examples of university administration meeting with them and listening but not seeming to have strategies to manage conflicting views or conflict between groups in a way that lessened the impact on Jewish

staff and students' wellbeing. Some made the same point and named the failure to make all groups impacted by the current Middle East conflict safe. Yet another group described their sense of an over-attentiveness to Jewish distress compared to others.

From Jewish staff and student participants, there was a strong critique of the ways in which Jewish voices were homogenised and then policed. "To have one's community spoken about as a monolith… is really a form of racism," said a staff member. "It rests on this assumption that we have to think and act and behave as a monolith. I think that's deeply troubling" (FG43). Another staff member echoed this view, arguing that the "approach which we are seeing on campus is defining Jews on campus as 'Anti-Palestinian' which is absolutely not true" (WS019).

Participants also said that university leadership also showed a lack of meaningful engagement in addressing the religious observance needs of Jewish students and staff. Staff talked about being excluded from important meetings or events that take place during significant periods of religious observance, with little consideration or accommodation from university leadership.

3. Policies and systems to report and deter racism and discrimination are inadequate

A prevailing concern among participants was the widespread lack of trust in reporting systems. Many expressed scepticism that complaints would be taken seriously or result in any meaningful action. One student shared, "I don't know a single Jewish student at this university who would go to any of the university services and say, 'I feel unsafe'... because we know that nothing will happen" (FG06).

Some had strong concerns about privacy and safety. "There is no clear policy pathway for staff to raise concerns about antisemitism, and those that do exist are often weaponised against Jewish staff themselves. The complaints process lacks transparency and independence" (WS014).

Some students also expressed that while some universities have provided designated "safe rooms" for Jewish students, these measures often felt symbolic and inadequate. Rather than fostering a sense of security, some felt the existence of such spaces heightened students' sense of vulnerability: "Almost every university gives us safe room, but what is it really doing? It gives us more fear, safe room means natural threat they are trying to protect us from" (FG53).

4. Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

Teaching staff were often seen as ill-equipped to handle discussions about race or antisemitism. This created unsafe classroom environments. "When it came up in class, the lecturer just froze. Then moved on. It was like we weren't there"

(FG06). One student noted the lack of support from their Department for a lecturer who had tried, in a very even-handed way, to ensure that political announcements made in class were done so in a way that was not offensive to other students (FG06).

Participants repeatedly raised concerns about the lack of meaningful inclusion or cultural safety on campus, in general. Diversity and anti-racism training was described as ineffective or absent. “There’s a 30-minute online module and you can click through it in 5 minutes. No one takes it seriously” (FG06).

Summary of Racism@Uni Focus Groups – Middle Eastern Groups

Between May and June 2025, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the experiences of racism faced by students and staff across Australian universities. These discussions provided valuable and in-depth insights into the ways racism impacts individuals’ experiences on campus. This document presents a summary of the key findings from the Middle Eastern focus groups (FG) and written submissions (WS), organised under four overarching themes: (1) wellbeing, safety and progression; (2) leadership; (3) policy and systems; and (4) cultural safety and inclusion.

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

Middle Eastern students and staff described racism and exclusion as everyday realities on campus. Participants described microaggressions as routine and also recounted several instances of overt racism, including physical and verbal assaults and intimidation.

Middle Eastern staff report experiencing racist comments from colleagues, not necessarily directed at them, but mocking "a particular race or culture" or generalising negative stereotypes based on "wrong information" from social media or TV (FG32). Individuals who are "white-passing" or "white-sounding" from the Middle East reported being told, "You're not like them [other Middle Eastern people], you grew up here," invalidating their cultural identity (FG32).

The conflict in Gaza, the October 7 attacks and subsequent campus protests heightened these experiences, reinforcing underlying patterns of racism and discrimination. Palestinian students, in particular, shared how their identity was politicised and scrutinised. One student explained how simply introducing themselves as Palestinian was seen as controversial: “Just existing is controversial… I’m just introducing myself, I didn’t ask your take on anything” (FG17). An Arab academic staff also noted "far less attention to anti-Arab racism" compared to "other forms of racism" since October 7 (FG32).

Many reported emotional distress and self-censoring of their cultural heritage (such as refraining from identifying as Arab or wearing cultural garments like the keffiyeh), viewing the current climate as an escalation of an enduring and largely overlooked history of racism against Arabs and Muslims (FG05). Palestinians feel "asked to hide our identity as Palestinians" and "our grief". One Arab-Jewish student noted, "I no longer dare speak about Palestine in any context" (FG09). A Palestinian student reported being physically assaulted and verbally abused on campus, and university security later demanded she remove her "watermelon" badge, claiming it made others uncomfortable.

One student reflected on the cumulative impact, saying it "gave me a sense of non-belonging, and always made me feel like I'm not good enough" (WS020). Staff reported similar challenges to their wellbeing and professional development. "If you mention Palestine, suddenly you're under investigation… it's exhausting" (FG35), explained one academic.

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in acknowledging and addressing racism and discrimination

Participants consistently described university leadership as disengaged and performative when it came to addressing racism. Participants expressed frustration that universities refused to acknowledge anti-Palestinian racism. Participants reported that university messaging since October 7 is seen as "extremely biased", siding with pro-Israel interests and "invisibilising Palestinian history, Palestinian narrative and the genocide itself".

One student added, "The university will not meet with Palestinian students. They refuse to meet Palestinian students" (FG28). Staff echoed this frustration, sharing how attempts to raise systemic issues were often shut down or ignored: "Senior management is all about 'inclusion', but the moment we speak up, they disappear" (FG11).

Some participants described experiences where leadership responses went beyond passivity and entered what they perceived as active hostility or negligence. For example, a student reported being yelled at by a university leader, being accused of "bringing criminals onto campus" in relation to an encampment that the student group explicitly stated they were not organising (FG17).

Institutional exclusion was another recurring theme. One staff member described "a lack of representation, of diverse cultures, races, religions... it's pretty evident at the more senior levels" (FG32). Others pointed to biased assumptions about capability based on background: "Some [colleagues] will underestimate certain people because of their background" (FG32).

3. Policies and systems to report and deter racism and discrimination are inadequate

Across the group discussions, students and staff described university complaint processes as confusing, burdensome, and unlikely to lead to meaningful outcomes. Rather than fostering accountability and supportive leadership, some participants argued that universities actively discouraged complaints. One student shared, “The [university] continues to intimidate people through their processes to prevent formal complaints” (WS029). Racism against Middle Eastern and Palestinian individuals was reported as "always hidden behind rules and or policies". It was described as "vicious" and a form of "exceptionalism" where "You matter, except if you’re Palestinian".

Beyond frustration with the complaint systems, students also expressed concern for their safety when considering whether to report racism. One student shared, “I have not reported it because of potential ostracisation and fear of making ‘enemies’ in the workplace” (WS021). These fears were compounded by a broader climate of hostility, both within universities and across social media, where speaking out about racism or discrimination often carried personal risk. Fear of backlash or being labelled as difficult further discouraged people from reporting.

Participants shared that reporting racism, particularly "misconduct for racially harassing you," can take "6 to 8 months", during which time the victim remains in close proximity to the alleged harasser. Staff reported being pushed into trauma-support roles without institutional backing: “We're sitting there with students with 20 members of their family dead. We're not trained for this as staff. We have no training for this. It's not our role” (FG09). These staff described seeking support from professional services to assist a group of students facing a serious and identifiable psychological impact on their ability to participate fully in their studies.

Students reported turning to campus security staff when feeling threatened or, in one case, physically assaulted. However, they perceived that security staff were hesitant to intervene, provide immediate support, or escalate the matter to police or senior university decision-makers, even making excuses not to take any action.

4. Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

Students and staff reported a lack of culturally safe spaces and described university inclusion efforts as tokenistic and superficial. Participants also criticised the contradictory nature of university actions that undermined claims of inclusion and equity.

Participants cited cases where programs exploring Middle Eastern culture or Islamic art were abruptly cancelled or scrutinised, while controversial speakers

were platformed without consultation: "My [university] cancelled the Arts Exhibition […] without any consultation, without giving any clear reason. […] It just showed me what the University considers the worth of Middle Eastern people to be …and their voices, and I was just shocked" (FG32). These decisions contributed to a wider sense that their identities were not only marginalised but actively unwelcome in university spaces.

Staff also spoke about the difficulty of participating in public discourse on contentious topics such as Zionism or pro-Palestine protests. Academics from Middle Eastern backgrounds described feeling unable to safely express their perspectives in public forums, fearing professional or reputational consequences if they did so. Academics reported being "frightened of…repercussions" for expressing views on the Middle East, leading to extensive "self-censorship'. Some contrasted this with what they perceived as greater institutional tolerance or support for other groups engaging in similar discussions.

Summary of Racism@Uni Focus Groups – Muslim Groups

Between May and June 2025, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the experiences of racism faced by students and staff across Australian universities. These discussions provided valuable and in-depth insights into the ways racism impacts individuals' experiences on campus. This document presents a summary of the key findings from the Muslim focus groups (FG) and written submissions (WS), organised under four overarching themes: (1) wellbeing, safety and progression; (2) leadership; (3) policy and systems; and (4) cultural safety and inclusion.

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

Muslim students and staff reported the psychological toll of racism, Islamophobia and anti-Islam actions on their mental health. There were reported incidents in which participants expressed fear of being verbally or physically attacked or deliberately targeted. One student shared, "There are people on campus who actually would want to hurt you for being visibly Muslim" (FG34). In some cases, students reported avoiding being on campus due to safety issues, as one student explained: "I have started going university on hours when students are not there, like after hours and weekend to avoid conflicts" (WS094).

The ongoing emotional toll of these experiences was also raised. One student shared, "I often found myself emotionally exhausted, questioning my own actions and worth, and explaining my distress to friends who witnessed the toll it took on me" (WS024).

Muslim students and staff reported pervasive microaggressions and several cases of direct, overt racism. One student described: "It's more about the attitudes which are in hidden form… you are feeling that something is happening to you… but you do not have any visible answers to let other people know" (FG42).

Muslim women described how their experiences were shaped by both racial and gendered stereotypes. For many, wearing the hijab became a marker that subjected them to assumptions and hostility. A student expressed her desire to remove her hijab after facing repeated instances of being targeted, "I'm so scared (to wear it) here". She added, "You can take it off… but it's my identity. That's why I don't want to take it off" (FG42).

These experiences contributed to self-doubt and a diminished sense of belonging. "You start to doubt yourself… you wonder, am I overreacting? Am I the problem?" (FG37).

Muslim women also described impossible expectations placed on them, summarised by one participant: "If I wear hijab, I'm assumed to be oppressed. If I don't, I'm not Muslim enough" (FG37). The combined effect of these experiences left students and staff feeling silenced and exhausted.

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in acknowledging and addressing racism and discrimination

The gap between public cultural celebrations and the daily reality of exclusion contributed to a broader loss of trust in the university. As one participant explained, "They love multicultural events, but they don't actually want to hear what it's like to be us" (FG37). For many, this disconnect reinforced the belief that universities are more invested in appearances than in addressing the actual experiences of discrimination faced by students and staff.

Religious observances were another area where leadership failed to engage meaningfully. "You have to use your own leave to take Eid off… you wouldn't ask that of someone on Christmas" (FG37), shared a staff member, illustrating the unequal treatment of cultural and religious needs.

Beyond passivity, some participants described what they saw as more active forms of resistance or hostility from senior leaders when it came to supporting culturally diverse programs or staff. Examples included decisions to cut courses related to Islamic studies, with participants perceiving these as being driven by ideological opposition rather than academic or financial considerations. Others reported experiences where senior leaders appeared to intervene in staffing and promotion decisions in ways that, in their view, disadvantaged Muslim staff members.

3. Policies and systems to report and deter racism and discrimination are inadequate

Muslim students and staff described university reporting systems for racism as ineffective, unsafe, and culturally inappropriate. A prevailing concern was that raising complaints could backfire, damaging their academic standing or professional reputation. One Muslim student explained, "I'm scared that if I bring this up to anybody, it's going to affect my essay. It's going to affect the rest of my grades" (FG22). Another staff member shared, "I didn't file a complaint… because I was told it will affect your PR" (FG09). The fear of negative consequences for speaking up led many to avoid formal reporting altogether.

The prevalence of microaggressions and covert racism was described as a barrier to reporting cases of racism. As one student put it, "Covert racism exists but it's hard to prove" (WS113).

Participants also highlighted how deeply normalised racism had become. One academic remarked, "[reporting mechanism] is to protect the higher-ups. This is well known in higher education" (FG37). The perception that the system existed primarily to shield the university rather than support those harmed dissuaded many from engaging with it at all.

Some participants reported concerns that reporting systems were not just ineffective but could be used in ways that harmed complainants. Participants spoke about experiences where complaints appeared to be minimised, mishandled, or, in some cases, used against those raising concerns. Students also described situations where, after reporting serious incidents, including physical safety concerns, they felt discouraged from pursuing the matter further.

4. Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

Students often reported feeling that their full identities were not genuinely valued within university environments. As one student reflected, "I came to Australia with the expectation that diverse perspectives, especially from women of different cultural backgrounds, would be welcomed in university spaces" (WS024). Instead, many found that cultural, religious, and gender diversity were welcomed only superficially, while deeper structural barriers remained unaddressed.

Muslim students described how culturally appropriate support was lacking, and how discussions about topics such as anti-Islam, Islamophobia or Palestine were avoided. "You get the 'vibe' of not bringing it up… we're welcome as long as we don't talk about Islamophobia" (FG37). For many, this reinforced the message that inclusion is conditional and that universities are more invested in appearances than in building genuinely inclusive and culturally safe environments.

Women who wear hijab described unique challenges: "People stare, they whisper, they laugh… It makes you want to hide" (FG34). Another staff member stated: "Being both Muslim and a woman of colour, it feels like I have double the reason to stay quiet" (FG35). Others shared how feelings of exclusion extended beyond the classroom, with one student explaining, "It has made me hesitant to put myself at the forefront of student groups and events because I don't feel culturally safe" (WS118).

Participants also described how their identities were often reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes, with little recognition of their individual skills, backgrounds, or academic motivations. Some students felt judged based on their appearance, with assumptions made about their language ability, cultural background, or reasons for studying in Australia. For example, some international students described being stereotyped as being in Australia primarily for migration outcomes, while others felt their academic work was viewed less favourably after disclosing aspects of their identity.

Staff also reported that professional capabilities were frequently assessed through the lens of bias and stereotype. As one participant explained, "I'm going to have to be like three or four times more brilliant for them to see me as equal" (FG37).

Summary of Racism@Uni Focus Groups – Asian Groups

Between May and June 2025, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the experiences of racism faced by students and staff across Australian universities. These discussions provided valuable and in-depth insights into the ways racism impacts individuals' experiences on campus. This document presents a summary of the key findings from the Asian focus groups (FG) and written submissions (WS), organised under four overarching themes: (1) wellbeing, safety and progression; (2) leadership; (3) policy and systems; and (4) cultural safety and inclusion.

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

Asian students and staff consistently reported that racism, both overt and subtle, had a profound effect on their wellbeing, including stress, disrupted sleep, and physical health problems. One staff member shared, "I wake up at night thinking why they do it… couldn't sleep, suffered a lot, blood pressure shooting up, taken to hospital because of that" (FG47).

Social isolation was a common theme among students, who described being avoided by peers or treated as outsiders in classrooms and social spaces. One participant shared, "If you sit in a certain corner, people will not come and sit

with you… if you are local, you'll be treated more friendly" (FG33). Many students reported a growing reluctance to speak up in class or pursue opportunities, citing fear of judgment or dismissal based on their accents, appearance, or perceived foreignness, as one wrote "the invisible weight of bias fuels constant self-doubt, 'am I good enough?", and these causing hesitation or withdrawal from opportunities that were rightfully earned (WS052).

Staff reported impacts of racism on their academic and professional advancement. Staff shared stories of being passed over for leadership roles, having their contributions undervalued, or being labelled "difficult" when advocating for fairness. An academic explained: "I've seen tens and tens of Aussie-made mistakes, but they're not held accountable. When I say something, I'm called difficult" (FG47).

Participants also reported that discrimination shaped student evaluations, with implications for career progression. An academic stated that "Some people give bad reviews just because they don't like your accent or name. But that affects how you're seen by managers" (FG14), highlighting how racial bias can become embedded in institutional systems of assessment and promotion.

Safety concerns were particularly acute in placements or unfamiliar environments. Students spoke of being treated with suspicion or hostility, and some faced threats or mistreatment from staff.

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in acknowledging and addressing racism and discrimination

Participants expressed widespread frustration with the failure of university leadership to meaningfully engage with racism. While public statements and diversity policies existed, they were often seen as symbolic rather than transformative. Many viewed these efforts as motivated by reputation management rather than genuine change. One student observed, "They'll just do the bare minimum to tick the box. They don't want to deal with it properly" (FG34).

Attempts to address racism through committees or taskforces were described as performative, often dominated by people without first-hand experience: "The Head of HR is there, the Head of Wellbeing is there… but none of them know what it's like. You feel alone in the room" (FG51). As a result, some staff felt their participation in anti-racism efforts was tokenistic or led instead to pressure to conform to dominant cultural norms. A staff member who participated in a university anti-racism initiative reflected the process as: "By encouraging a certain kind of leadership quality, assertive, individualistic, I felt as if I was contributing to the assimilation process" (FG51).

For international students, the perception of being treated as financial assets rather than valued community members was widespread. One student stated,

"This is not what I thought it would be like in Australia. Universities are there for the money" (FG50). This sense of exploitation was exacerbated by inconsistent access to support services and minimal responsiveness to cultural or linguistic diversity.

3. Policies and systems to report and deter racism and discrimination are inadequate

Asian students and staff described formal reporting systems as opaque, ineffective, or actively discouraging. Fear of retaliation or dismissal often prevented individuals from coming forward. One participant stated, "Even if you report, they either make excuses or say it's miscommunication. Nothing changes" (FG36). Those who did report were often left unsupported. An Asian academic shared, "I felt more alone after I reported. People avoided me like I had done something wrong" (FG14).

Where support services did exist, participants described them as inconsistent or culturally ill-equipped. One staff member shared, "Talking about microaggressions with an Anglo-white counsellor is awkward — they don't understand" (FG51). Another commented that staff and students often turned to informal support networks instead: "We all kind of talk among ourselves about what happened… because we know no one else will really get it" (FG33).

For those with intersecting identities, the challenges were compounded. A senior academic remarked, "I'm a woman, a person of colour, and from a non-English speaking background — the disadvantage multiplies" (FG51).

4. Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

Participants widely criticised cultural inclusion initiatives as symbolic rather than structural. Anti-racism training was often described as "a checkbox exercise" that lacked accountability or follow-up. One staff member noted, "They run the training, but no one's behaviour actually changes" (FG7).

Curricula often failed to reflect the diversity of the student population, and there was little space for cultural diversity. In addition, international students experience language barriers and cultural differences in studies: "It disadvantaged me during my studies. I had to work harder to keep up with domestic students who spoke fast and were always more confident to speak first" (WS022), which was often misinterpreted as a lack of engagement. Others pointed out that teachers seemed unaware of these dynamics: "They teach cultural sensitivity in theory but don't apply it in practice" (FG44).

Many students, particularly first-generation or international ones, struggled to navigate university systems. They described feeling overwhelmed by bureaucratic processes, unsupported in online learning, and often disadvantaged by a lack of familiarity with academic expectations. One participant recounted

how they missed assessments because they didn't know how to use the learning portal: "I found out about my first assessment after it was already due" (FG44). Another student, enrolled in online-only classes, failed an entire unit after struggling to connect with lecturers and peers: "It was a very expensive mistake" (FG44).

Summary of Racism@Uni Focus Groups – African Groups

Between May and June 2025, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the experiences of racism faced by students and staff across Australian universities. These discussions provided valuable and in-depth insights into the ways racism impacts individuals' experiences on campus. This document presents a summary of the key findings from the African focus groups (FG) and written submissions (WS), organised under four overarching themes: (1) wellbeing, safety and progression; (2) leadership; (3) policy and systems; and (4) cultural safety and inclusion.

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

African students described how racism shaped their everyday experience at university, both in overt and subtle ways. Participants shared being the target of blatant verbal and physical abuse: "You just be walking around on campus, and some might just come up and just yell 'n***'… it's crazy because it's 2020-something and we're still going around saying that stuff" (FG52).

Students reported being hypervigilant with their behaviour and scared of how people would perceive them because of their ethnicity. As one student put it, "even when it comes to like raising your voice … you can never [do it]. You can never get loud, because … once you get loud, you're treated as a violent aggressor, no matter what" (FG52).

The sense of not belonging was reinforced through dismissive comments and normalised forms of racism: "During group work … [a group of white students] didn't want to work with me. I reported to the tutor and requested to be assigned another group, but she [said] that I should learn to advocate for myself in such situations" (WS099). For some, the emotional impact of racism was so severe that it shaped their entire academic trajectory.

Participants described how these same prejudices shaped their opportunities. "[Racism] has also caused a level of unwelcome pressure to perform because I have found that, especially as a black woman in a STEM field, my qualifications, intelligence, contributions and ideas are scrutinised much more than my white counterparts" (WS115). Even access to space was monitored differently based

on students' ethnicity, making them feel unwelcome: "You're trying to book events and stuff. They'll be like, oh, what do you need this space for?" (FG52).

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in acknowledging and addressing racism and discrimination

Participants consistently described university leadership as passive and disconnected when it comes to addressing racism. For many, diversity is treated as a branding exercise rather than a genuine institutional value. As a participant explained, "They actively don't respond to you…they gaslight you…they make sure to frustrate you by passing your case to different people until nothing is done" (WS004). Such responses described university systems as designed to protect the institution rather than support the individual.

Students shared frustration that when racism is raised, the response is often symbolic rather than practical. "In moments when I've reported it, it has not been taken with the seriousness … Often times my claims have been questioned, or the offences have been downplayed to a minor misunderstanding by the administration" (WS115). Participants described feeling stuck in cycles of consultation and discussion, while the root causes of exclusion and discrimination remained unaddressed.

3. Policies and systems to report and deter racism and discrimination are inadequate

Participants described university reporting systems as ineffective and unsafe. The process itself often discouraged people from coming forward. As one student explained, "They would deny the complaints and encourage further racial discrimination among staff and students, as not all complaints are investigated. The University authority never held other staff or students accountable" (WS128). This lack of clarity and trust left many unsure whether speaking up would lead to any meaningful action or whether they would simply be dismissed or face repercussions.

Even those willing to speak up were often discouraged by how difficult the process was to navigate: "I've faced several challenges in reporting and addressing racism within my university, including … a lack of clear reporting procedures and limited support or resources for those affected" (WS061). Other participants echoed this frustration, pointing to a culture where the bar for taking racism seriously is set impossibly high. "They do it in such a way... if I complain about, it's a grievance issue, not bullying. It's not racism" (FG31).

This lack of trust in reporting systems meant that microaggressions and racist jokes often went unchallenged. One student shared their experience of hearing a George Floyd joke in class: "They just forgot I was there… I walked out of the room, and they still hadn't figured out why I was upset" (FG52). For many, the

message from the university was clear: while racism might be acknowledged in policy, it is rarely confronted in practice.

One student who shared being physically and sexually abused reported to the university but did not receive support. This student shared how this experience impacted their academic education and career: "I don't want to pursue higher education because of what I went through, even though I am bright" (WS004).

4. Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

Participants described the constant pressure to suppress parts of their identity in order to survive within the university. "As a person of colour, when you're trying to be yourself, you get discriminated… so you try to blend in" (FG52). Students shared how small daily choices such as what they wore, how they spoke, and who they associated with were shaped by the need to avoid standing out or reinforcing stereotypes.

Language was a particularly powerful marker of difference. Several students described how they stopped speaking their native language on campus to avoid judgment or isolation (FG52). Others explained how simply existing in spaces while visibly Black often triggered suspicion. "I could come in sweatpants, hoodies. They might be like, oh, like you, part of like this, and that... which is kind of dragged" (FG52). Gathering in groups was no different. "If you were in like a group, just a group of black people, people would be like really afraid to approach you" (FG52).

Other participants spoke of similar experiences at the institutional level, describing how they were visible only for superficial reasons: "You get the more up you go in power, the whiter it gets. The more down you go in power, the blacker it gets" (FG31). Genuine inclusion, they explained, required more than visual diversity; it required structural change.

Yet, despite these challenges, students highlighted the importance of building community as a source of strength and cultural safety. "Community helped me not (assimilate). I cared a lot less, but I also felt supported" (FG52). For many, it was through these peer networks that they could reclaim space, express themselves authentically, and resist the pressure to shrink their identities to fit within university structures that were never designed for them.

Summary of Racism@Uni Focus Groups – Pasifika Groups

Between May and June 2025, we conducted a series of focus groups to explore the experiences of racism faced by students and staff across Australian universities. These discussions provided valuable and in-depth insights into the ways racism impacts individuals' experiences on campus. This document presents a summary of the key findings from the Pasifika focus groups (FG) and

written submissions (WS), organised under four overarching themes: (1) wellbeing, safety and progression; (2) leadership; (3) policy and systems; and (4) cultural safety and inclusion.

1. Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

Pasifika students described racism not as an isolated event but a constant presence, most often experienced through microaggressions, stereotyping, and dehumanising assumptions. "These microaggressions are exhausting," one participant shared. "We have to choose whether we fight back or just ignore it" (FG40).

Stereotypes ranged from assumptions about language proficiency – "people would say to me, wow you speak really good English" (FG40) – to direct slurs such as the story of a Pasifika student participant in a debate on climate change being told, "perhaps you should catch the boat back to where you came from so that there's less carbon emissions released" (FG40).

A student described sport referees engaged and paid by the university as operating on the racist assumption that Pasifika rugby and netball players will inevitably be rougher and needing to be sent strong messages early in every game, the effect of which was discriminatory. One of the students who had been called out for speaking good English and had in fact attended an Australian private school, then explained that they are seen then as the "exception" and "as one of them." (FG40)

Students reported often second-guessing themselves and questioning their place at university. For some, the behaviours that triggered such doubts extended into physical encounters. As a student reported: "I was walking on the pathway at uni… he shooed me off the pathway and waved his hands at me…I got a shock and quickly jumped off the path for him to walk on" (FG40).

Another participant observed herself becoming like her grandmother, who just let racist interactions go, because it is too exhausting always to call them out. She was distressed by this and the lack of progress over two generations it represented. And it made her feel tired as well as sad. (FG40)

2. University leadership is perceived to be passive in acknowledging and addressing racism and discrimination

Universities were described as disengaged from the realities of Pasifika students, engaging only in surface-level inclusion. "Tokenistic engagement" and a desire to "blend together" with the broader student body were seen as institutional defaults.

Pasifika students described being handed disproportionate cultural responsibilities without institutional authority or support. "The university expects

us to carry the cultural load… There was a Māori student who wanted to graduate with their cultural cloak, and they sent the student to us. We don't have authority to speak to these things" (FG40).

Although some universities have specific Pasifika-identified positions and cultural programs, participants described environments where their contributions were ignored or appropriated without recognition. One student said, "Our student club created outreach programs and conferences since 2016 with no support, recognition or acknowledgement for our work" (FG40). When senior staff did appear, it was "in a tokenistic manner to be seen," with no follow-up or resourcing.

3. Policies and systems to report and deter racism and discrimination are inadequate

There was widespread mistrust in institutional processes, with students reporting relying on each other. At the same time, students recounted experiences of being ignored or punished for their efforts to build their community. During a fundraiser for scholarships, campus security forcibly removed them: "the security guard chased us off campus. We had to go to the local park to continue our donut drive … Would they have done that to other non-Pacific students?" (FG40).

4. Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

The burden of creating safe spaces fell to Pasifika students themselves. With little support, they established clubs, mentoring networks, conferences, and scholarship drives. "We are doing all this work that the university should be doing, but we are just students", one participant shared (FG40).

Younger students participating in the Pasifika student group paid tribute to older students who have formed a strong community among Pasifika students and been very protective of the younger students. The group explained that this community bond is a culturally grounded response, describing it as a Village, where "we go for both community and learning." (FG40).

They did, however, acknowledge that it has had a cost on the older students who had been leaders. One such leader described the personal cost: "I deferred my studies to do this work," one said. "It was a sacrifice I chose to make, but if I hadn't, I would have graduated years ago" (FG40).

Appendix I – Refresher training in trauma informed facilitation for focus group facilitators

Trauma informed facilitation - refresh

22/4/2025

Think
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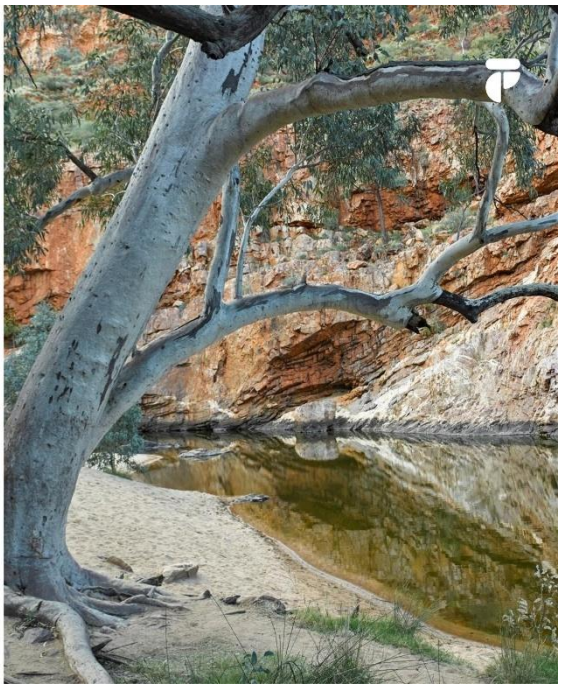
Resolve

Trauma-Informed Principles Revisited

As experienced facilitators, you understand the importance of a trauma-informed approach.

- **Acknowledge the potential impact of trauma** on individuals, which can stem from various sources.
- Remember that **data collection methods like focus groups can inadvertently contribute to the risk of re-traumatisation**.
- **Focus on creating a safe, empowering environment** that fosters a sense of safety, control, and self-worth.
- Consider the **likelihood of re-traumatisation increasing** when working with individuals who have experienced historical, intergenerational, or cultural trauma, including members of cultural and ethnic minority groups and those with intersecting identities.



Minimising harm

Continue to prioritise the following strategies to minimise harm:

Voluntary Participation: Ensure individuals participate willingly and can withdraw at any time.

Trigger Warnings: Provide clear warnings before discussing potentially sensitive topics.

Alternative Disclosure Channels: Offer confidential ways for participants to share information.

Remind participants:

This is voluntary.

To only share what they feel comfortable sharing.

If they are sharing knowledge or experiences of others or their community more broadly, to ensure they have permission.

3

Key strategies

- **Avoid Probing Personal Trauma:** Focus on general observations, not specific personal incidents.
- **Support Availability:** Remind participants of available support services.
- **"Scaffold" Topics:** Gradually approach sensitive discussions, starting with general themes.

- **Check-Ins:** Regularly ask how participants are feeling and offer breaks.
- **Validate Emotions:** Acknowledge and normalise participants' feelings.
- **Follow-Up:** Consider well-being after the session.

4

Building trust & setting expectations

- **Introductions**: Clearly explain your role and the purpose of the focus group. Encourage participants to introduce themselves to build community.
- **Objectives and Structure**: Clearly outline the goals of the focus group and how their input will be used.
- **Ground Rules**: Reinforce clear guidelines, such as the Four C's: Contribution, Candour, Confidentiality, and Care. Emphasise honest communication, diverse opinions, and respect for privacy.

How we are achieving this in the focus groups:

- Seek permission to record
- Reinforce the four "c's"
- Remind people about code of conduct
- Focus on lived experiences and practical solutions for the future ie what would've helped? What could help?

5

A respectful and inclusive experience

Follow the questions in the facilitators guide

Use neutral language to avoid biasing responses.

Actively encourage participation from quieter individuals while managing dominant voices.

Utilise round-robin techniques to ensure everyone has an opportunity to speak.

Actively listen and respond to participants' needs with flexibility and empathy.

Foster a non-judgmental atmosphere that values diverse perspectives.

Validate participants' emotions and acknowledge moments of candour.

Encourage dissenting opinions or alternative viewpoints to enrich discussions.

Regularly summarise and seek validation

6

Follow up support

Remember that racism is trauma and should be considered within a trauma-informed framework

Recognise that individuals with multiple marginalised identities may be particularly vulnerable to sustained and recurrent trauma

Practice cultural humility

Listen actively to understand diverse worldviews and avoid making assumptions

Support

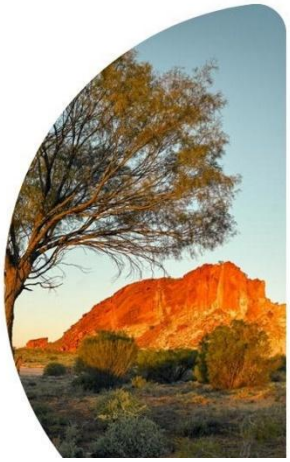
- Lifeline
- General support services for staff and students
- If someone is distressed follow up with them 1:1 and provide information about specific services at their institution

7

Appendix J – Presentation to Advisory Committee (May meeting)

Australian Human Rights Commission

Racism@Uni Study



01.05.2025

Advisory Committee Meeting

Think Change Resolve

Think Change Resolve

Agenda

1 Project Overview
2 TCR Team
3 Project Timeline
4 Methods: Qualitative Focus
5 Methods: Stakeholder co-design consultations
6 Methods: Focus Groups
7 Methods: Written Submissions
8 Focus Group Recruitment
9 Focus Group Design and Implementation
10 Next Steps

AHRC | Advisory Committee

2

1 Project Overview

The Australian Human Rights Commission is leading the **Racism@Uni Study** to examine racism in universities and develop evidence-based reforms. The Project focuses on the experiences of diverse communities and aims to foster safer, more inclusive university environments through specific, actionable recommendations.

Quantitative component

- Conducted by a team at ANU
- National online survey on the prevalence and impact of racism experienced by students and staff in Australian universities

Qualitative component

- Conducted by **Think Change Resolve**
- Focus groups and thematic analysis

2 TCR Team

Expert leadership

- Robert Griew Project Director (Jewish)
- Professor Marcia Langton AO Expert Lead (Yiman)

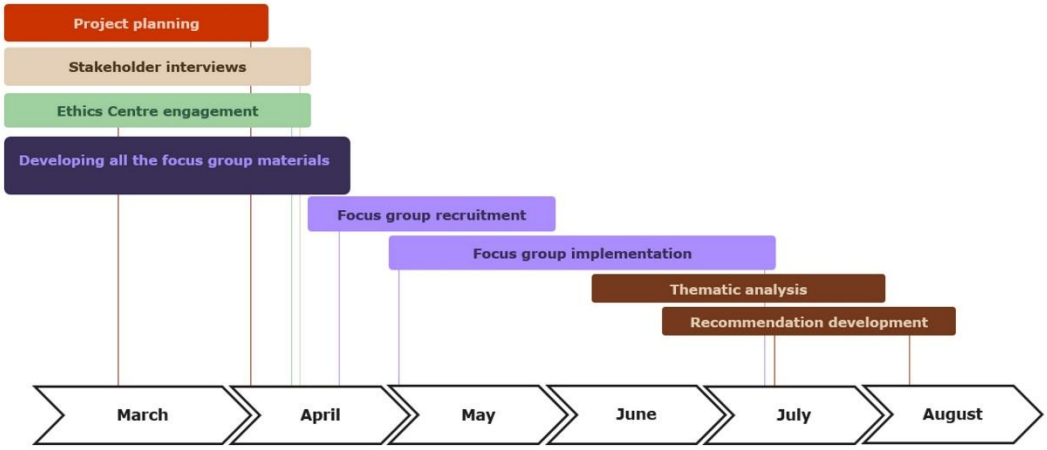
Project management & methods

- Dr Kylie Gwynne Methods Lead
- Dr Alex S Portes Human Rights Frameworks
- Ieva Rozentale Project Management

Engagement, facilitation & analysis

- Mubarak Almattar (Middle-Eastern Muslim)
- Jimmy Sebire (Western Arrernte)
- Vithja Tong (Asian and Fmr International Student)

3 Project Timeline



4 Methods: Qualitative Focus

As TCR is responsible for the qualitative aspects of the Project, we recognize the importance of:

- **Centring Participant Voices:** Highlighting the lived experiences of those affected by racism at Australian universities, with particular emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Asian, Jewish, Muslim, Middle Eastern, African, Pasifika, South Sea Islander, and international student communities, while also considering intersectional discrimination.
- **Generating contextual insights:** Providing rich, in-depth information to complement the quantitative survey findings.
- **Ensuring cultural safety:** Applying trauma-informed and human rights-based practices to support culturally safe engagement.
- **Informing systemic change:** Feeding student and staff feedback into the development of actionable recommendations and identifying directions for institutional reform.
- **Planning carefully and efficiently:** Structuring all activities to maximise effectiveness and respect participant contributions.
- **Supporting positive experiences:** Prioritising participant wellbeing and ensuring the accurate collection and reporting of high-quality data.

5 Methods: Stakeholder co-design consultations

- **Purpose:** Gather advice to design culturally safe, inclusive, and trauma-informed focus groups. The focus was **not** on lived experience sharing.
- **Preparation**: A stakeholder co-design consultation **common approach** was developed, then specific nuancing was considered to ensure the consultations were sensitive to different subject matters and followed a structure.
- **Questions asked**: Recruitment strategies, focus group design and cultural sensitivities, and referral pathways for support.
- **Participation**: Stakeholders were invited to an **online interview** or asked to fill in a **written submission**.
- **Stakeholder selection**: Based on AHRC lists, refined by leadership, advocacy & community links. Groups included student associations, academics, faith-based organisations, university support centres and community leaders.
- **Next steps**: Stakeholders were asked to share the focus group expression of interest with their **broader networks**.

6 Methods: Focus Groups

Scope: 26 focus groups across 31 of Australia's 42 universities

Purpose: To capture depth, diversity and underrepresented experiences of racism in higher education

Sampling Strategy: Accounting for population concentration, issue prevalence, geographic coverage & university diversity

Screening Process:

- **Flexible participant placement** in focus groups based on identity, safety, and lived experience.
- In the EOI form, participants can:
  - **Nominate preferred groups**
  - **Raise safety concerns**
  - **Share additional identity/contextual details**
- **Former students** (within 3 years) may be included for deeper insight and reduced risk.

7 Methods: Written Submissions

- Alternative for those unable or unwilling to join focus groups
- Public link promoted via EOI process
- Open to overrepresented cohorts, unavailable participants or those preferring anonymity
- Submissions included in thematic analysis
- Hosted securely via Microsoft SharePoint with full data privacy compliance

8 Focus Group Recruitment

- **Institution-based recruitment** such as university equity and diversity offices, Indigenous education units, student associations.
- **Community-led groups** such as cultural and religious organisations.
- **Professional bodies** that sponsor students (e.g. AIDA).
- **Social media campaign** through university and community channels.
- **Networks** referred to in the stakeholder co-design consultations.

9 Focus group design and implementation

- **Session structure**: Run for 90 minutes, with an additional 30 minutes allocated for orientation and debriefing.
- **Mixed-mode delivery**: Offering online and in-person options.
- **Facilitation model and training**: Each focus group will be led by an experienced focus group moderator and a peer facilitator from the focus community.
- **Preparation**: All facilitators will have received training in trauma-informed facilitation and will carefully follow the facilitator plan that include customisations for each group.
- **Cultural safety & trauma-informed practice throughout the process**:
  - Pre-, during, and post-session care prioritized through trauma-informed, culturally safe facilitation.
  - Distress protocols and referral lists developed.
  - Should any participant get distressed, our team will contact and direct them to the appropriate support service at their university.
  - Clear information and participation choices provided.
  - Consent obtained from participants, ensuring they understand the purpose, risks, and benefits of participation.
  - Review of all materials by the Ethics Centre and Commission.
- **Reciprocity**: A voucher of $50 will be offered to each participant.

Next Steps

Data Analysis

- Thematic analysis will be conducted with cultural and lived experience input.
- Member checking and validation will be used where needed.
- Patterns and themes will be identified across focus groups and submissions.
- Findings will be reviewed through an expert workshop.
- A consensus approach will be used; differing views will be documented.

Reporting

- A summary of themes will be shared with stakeholders for feedback.
- An interim report will be drafted as a PowerPoint presentation and finalised after Commission review.

Appendix K – Presentation to Advisory Committee (August meeting)

Australian Human Rights Commission

Racism@Uni Study

August 2025

Advisory Committee Meeting

Think Change Resolve

Think Change Resolve

Contents

1 Project Overview

The Australian Human Rights Commission is leading the **Racism@Uni Study** to examine racism in universities. The Project focuses on the experiences of diverse communities and aims to foster safer, more inclusive university environments through specific, actionable recommendations.

Literature review
- Conducted by a team at UTS
- prevalence, nature and impact of individual and systemic racism within universities

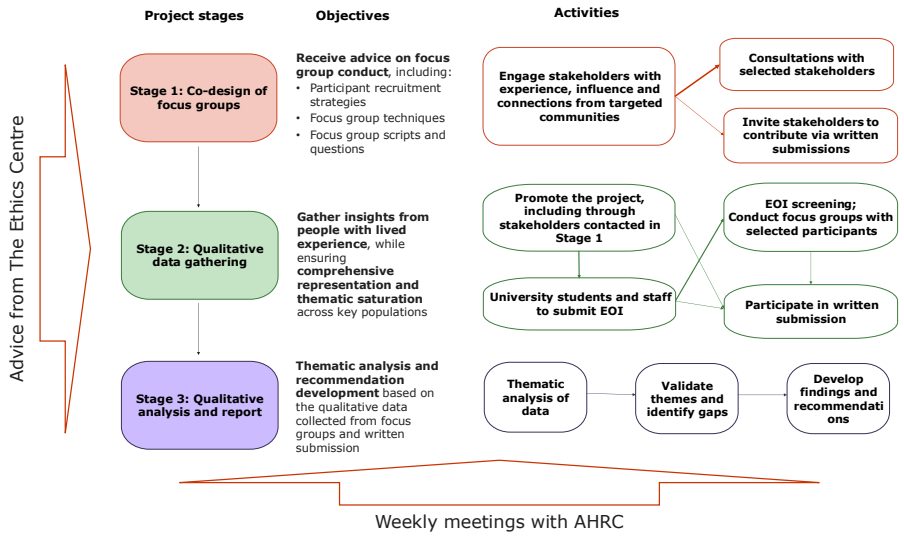
Quantitative component
- Conducted by a team at ANU
- National online survey on the prevalence and impact of racism

Qualitative component
- Conducted by Think Change Resolve and Langton & Partners
- Focus groups, written submissions and thematic analysis

→ This report addresses the qualitative component

Policy audit
- Conducted by the Commission
- Review policies related to racism across Australian universities

2 Methodology



2 Methodology

Facilitators kit for stakeholder co-design sessions

To enable a consistent approach across all facilitators and stakeholder groups

Refresher training for facilitators in trauma informed facilitation

To ensure facilitators were equipped to manage focus groups effectively and
reduce risk of re-traumatizing participants

Expanded consent process

To ensure participants were informed about the process and their role

Multi-modal recruitment

We used multiple modes to recruit participants including social media advertising, and professional and personal networks

Co-facilitation by people with lived experience

To maximise empathy, understanding and accuracy

Facilitators kit for focus groups

To enable consistency across all
focus groups including regular summaries
to check and confirm understanding

2 Methodology

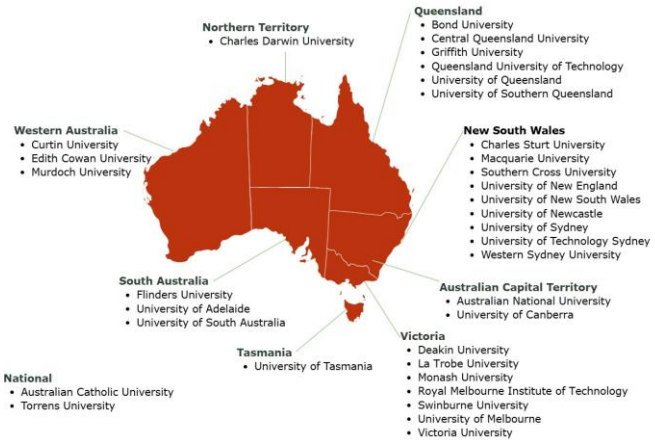
Number of participants in focus groups and written submissions

	Focus groups			Written Submissions			Total		
Group	**Staff**	**Students**	**Total**	**Staff**	**Students**	**Total**	**Staff**	**Students**	**Grand total**
Asian	9	61	70	9	24	33	18	85	**103**
Indigenous	9	22	31	15	15	30	24	37	**61**
Jewish	11	14	25	13	7	20	24	21	**45**
Middle Eastern	8	4	12	2	6	8	10	10	**20**
Muslim	5	6	11	6	9	15	11	15	**26**
African*	1	5	6	3	10	13	4	15	**19**
Pasifika and Australian South Sea Islander*	-	14	14	1	2	3	1	16	**17**
Intersectional	-	16	16	-	-	-	-	16	**16**
Other	-	-	-	1	2	3	1	2	**3**
Total	43	142	185	50	75	125	93	217	**310**

* These groups were included later in the project and were only intended to include students

2 Methodology

Map of the 34 universities represented in this project



3 Findings

Our findings are divided into four key areas:

Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

University leadership is perceived to be passive in addressing racism and discrimination

Policies and systems to report, deter and address racism and discrimination are inadequate

Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

3 Findings

Finding 1:

Racism and discrimination have a severe impact on the wellbeing, safety and progression of students and staff

1.1 Members of all groups described instances of microaggressions, bullying and discrimination in classrooms and other university settings

1.2 Members of all groups described harm to their wellbeing, resilience, and progression, with some expressing futility, loss of faith in university study or their career

1.3 There are shared experiences of being singled out and subjected to stereotypes that diminished their role as university staff or students

1.4 Global political events intensified racism and division on campus, leaving affected groups isolated, stigmatised, and unsupported

3 Findings

Finding 2:

University leadership is perceived to be passive in addressing racism and discrimination

2.1 Staff and students from all the groups complain that universities are not clear in their position on racism and discrimination, leading to feelings of being delegitimised

2.2 Many participants felt that universities have inadequate engagement with diverse communities, leading to an over-reliance on student clubs to support victims of racism

2.3 Participants failed to see people like themselves in senior roles and called out a lack of diversity among decision makers

2.4 Academic freedom and free speech are selectively applied as universities defend harmful rhetoric while marginalised voices face censorship, scrutiny and silence

2.5 These issues are compounded by other systemic challenges faced by those with intersectional identities, such as people with a disability and LGBTQIA+ people

3 Findings

Finding 3:

Policies and systems to report, deter and address racism and discrimination are inadequate

3.1 Staff and students lacked trust in university reporting systems, describing them as unclear, overly bureaucratic, unsafe and protecting institutional interests

3.2 Support services are described as lacking cultural awareness and practical guidance for navigating racism complaints

3.3 Institutional responses to violence and safety concerns are often perceived to reflect denial, deflection, or victim-blaming

3 Findings

Finding 4:

Universities fail to meaningfully promote cultural safety and inclusion

4.1 Across all groups, participants acknowledged instances of constructive leadership, yet there are still barriers to getting traction or creating positive changes

4.2 Staff and students from all groups criticised generic cultural awareness training as token, optional and 'window dressing'

4.3 Staff and students from all groups expressed a desire for the creation of respectful spaces for discussions on contemporary, difficult issues

4.4 Staff and students from all groups sought institutionalised support for specific cultural obligations

4 Suggested Recommendations

Context of the recommendations:

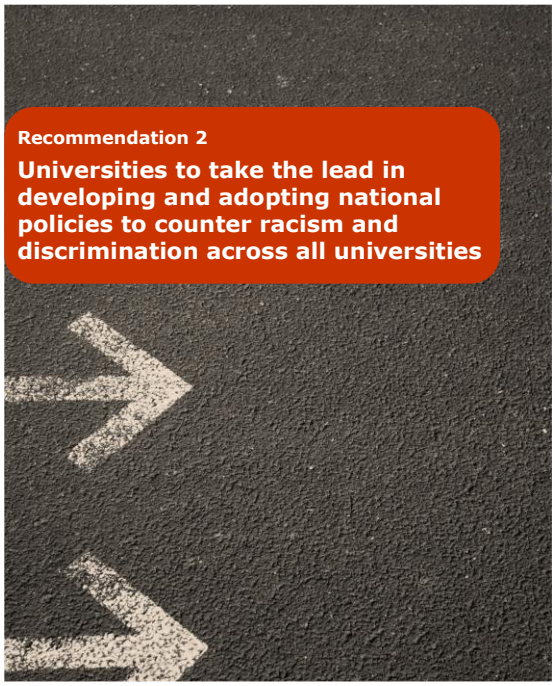
- Our scope and method are about listening to and analysing the lived experience of individuals who chose to participate in our process, and do not assess the prevalence of racism or broader geopolitical issues
- While some accounts reflect serious issues, they do not represent all staff or students, and participants often noted that campuses may still be safer than society at large
- Universities are complex and decentralised organisations, and many impactful decisions occur outside the oversight of senior leadership
- Addressing racism requires deliberate and visible leadership, and intentional strategies delivered with attention to detail from senior managers

4 Suggested Recommendations

There is an opportunity for universities to **reassert a fundamental value core to their place in a modern democracy**, grounded in their tradition as independent institutions.

This will require:

- leadership from universities to assert the value of intellectual independence through an explicit intolerance of racist, discriminatory practices and hateful discourse
- clear expectations of staff, students and civil society participants
- close and active engagement with diverse communities.

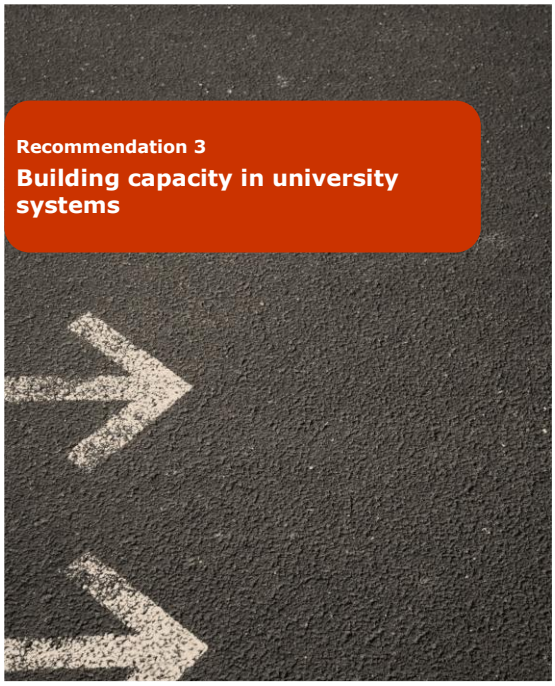


4 Suggested Recommendations

Developing and adopting national policies will provide a clear statement to all university community members that all forms of discriminatory and racist speech and practices are unacceptable.

To give life to this policy, universities could begin by **forming a Minister-appointed committee, chaired by TEQSA, to develop a policy suite** addressing the common issues raised in this report, including:

- recognition of cultural load
- strengthening transparency in reporting systems
- support for international students
- managing racism in the classroom and in all university environments as a priority



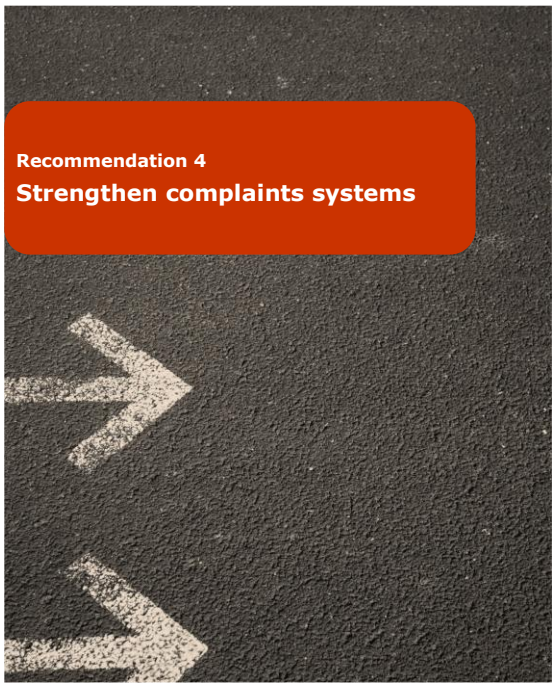
4 Suggested Recommendations

Australian Government Department of Education to **fund the development of online training and make it available to all universities** for:

- university teaching staff in promoting inclusion and cultural safety in curricula and the classroom, managing complex and contentious discussions well
- induction unit for students about how to engage in civil debate.

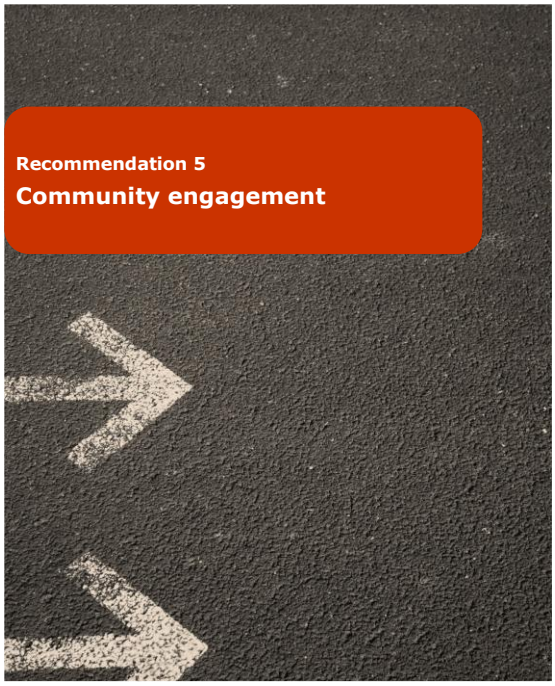
Universities should **collect and publish diversity data for employees**, including cultural background and collation by seniority.

University engagement with external agencies, including police and immigration, should be **handled by managers, with accountability and systems to advise university executives**.



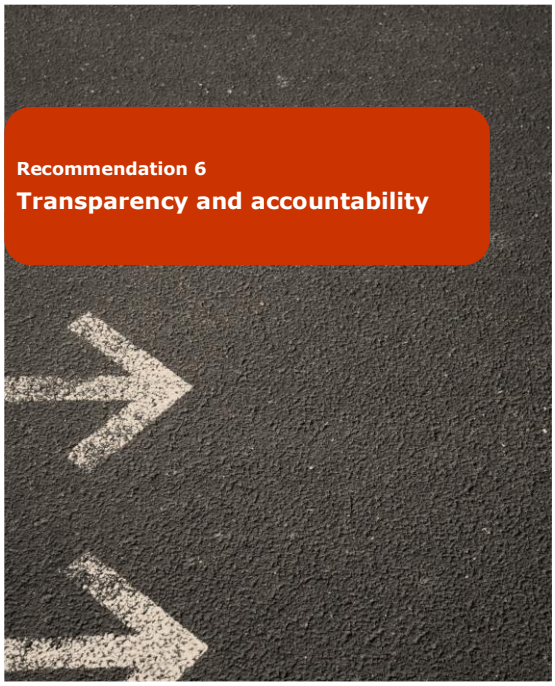
4 Suggested Recommendations

- Universities should **review complaints processes and systems** to reduce barriers, improve transparency, protect privacy, publicise consequences, and implement systemic responses to recurring issues.
- Universities should initiate processes to ensure **decisions about complaints and complaints handling are managed at appropriately senior levels**, with outcomes are communicated to individual complainants and to the representative bodies from minority communities.
- Incidents involving threats, violence, or harassment of minority groups should be **managed by university staff**, not contractors, with referral decisions clearly communicated to those affected.



4 Suggested Recommendations

- Universities should **reach out to or invite diverse community representatives**, including ethnic community groups, to **engage in constructive dialogue** that facilitates inclusive spaces, positions universities as safe and inclusive places, and enables debate and civil conversations about complex and contentious matters.
- An essential component of this engagement is actively **seeking feedback** from minority communities' civil society organisations regarding issues they face and that they are hearing about regarding the wellbeing and safety of their community members on campus.



4 Suggested Recommendations

Strengthening transparency and accountability across the university sector will require **targeted, system-level interventions**.

The following actions are proposed to support this objective:

- TEQSA should report annually on racism, discrimination and inclusion in Australian universities.
- Universities should add racism and discrimination outcomes to Executive KPIs
- Australian government should add racism indicator to Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching (QILT) survey
- AHRC should provide routine public reporting of anti-racism/anti-discrimination/pro-inclusion systems and strategies and their effectiveness every three years based on their own work and on TEQSA and QILT results.