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CREATING PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE AND ANTI-RACIST UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENTS

A Practical Guide for Higher Education Leaders and
Teams



About This Guide

Universities play an important role in shaping knowledge, participation, leadership and public discourse. They are places of learning, workplaces, research environments and communities.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's [Racism@Uni](#) study highlights that racism within higher education can significantly impact wellbeing, safety, participation, trust and belonging for both students and staff.

This guide is designed to support university leaders, educators and professional staff to strengthen:

- Psychological and cultural safety
- Racial literacy
- Anti-racist practice
- Institutional accountability
- Respectful and inclusive learning and workplace environments

The reflection prompts and strategies provided can support:

- Leadership teams
- Student services
- HR and people & culture teams
- Teaching and learning units
- Faculty and school leadership
- Equity and inclusion initiatives
- Professional learning and staff development

Why This Work Matters

Racism is not only interpersonal; it is also institutional and embedded within organisational structures.

Racism can also be embedded within the university through:

- Organisational culture
- Policies and systems
- Curriculum and pedagogy
- Workplace practices
- Leadership structures
- Institutional responses to harm

The Racism@Uni study found that racism affects:

- Well-being
- Participation
- Trust in institutions
- Sense of safety and belonging
- Staff and student progression and retention

Universities have a responsibility to create environments where:

- People can participate safely and visibly
- Respectful dialogue is supported
- Racism and discrimination are addressed appropriately
- Institutional responses are culturally safe and trauma-informed
- Human dignity and rights are upheld

Understanding Psychological and Cultural Safety

Psychological safety is critical and refers to environments where people feel safer to:

- Contribute ideas
- Ask questions
- Raise concerns
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Participate without fear of humiliation or retaliation

Cultural safety involves recognising and responding to:

- Power imbalances
- Systemic inequities
- Racism and discrimination
- Exclusionary practices
- The impacts of historical and institutional harm

Psychological and cultural safety are closely connected.

Without racial literacy and anti-racist practice, safety and inclusion can remain unevenly experienced across university communities.

Reflection Areas

1. Institutional Culture and Leadership

Reflection Questions

- *What messages do people receive about who belongs within the institution?*
- *How visible is anti-racist practice within leadership and governance?*
- *Do staff and students feel psychologically safe raising concerns about racism or exclusion?*
- *How are experiences of harm acknowledged and addressed?*
- *Does leadership reflect the diversity of the university community?*

Reflection Prompt

- *How does the institution demonstrate its commitment to well-being, cultural safety and anti-racist practice beyond policy statements?*

2. Racism as a Wellbeing and Safety Issue

The Racism@Uni report highlights racism as a psychosocial safety risk within higher education environments.

Reflection Questions

- *How does the institution recognise racism as a well-being and safety issue?*
- *Are students and staff supported through trauma-informed and culturally safe approaches?*
- *Are systems preventative or primarily reactive?*
- *How are risks of harm identified and addressed?*

Practical Considerations

- Culturally safe support pathways
- Well-being-centred responses
- Risk prevention approaches
- Staff capability development
- Accessible reporting mechanisms

3. Institutional Responses and Accountability

Trust in institutional responses is shaped by:

- Transparency
- Communication
- Cultural safety
- Fairness
- Accountability



Reflection Questions

- *Do staff and students trust institutional complaints processes?*
- *Are reporting pathways clear and accessible?*
- *How are people protected from retaliation or further harm?*
- *Are responses focused only on compliance or also on repair and learning?*
- *How are systemic patterns identified and addressed?*

Reflection Prompt

- *What experiences may discourage people from raising concerns or seeking support?*

4. Respectful Dialogue & Participation

Universities are spaces where complex, challenging and sometimes uncomfortable conversations occur.

Reflection Questions

- *How does the institution support respectful dialogue across differences?*
- *Are staff and students equipped to navigate difficult conversations constructively?*
- *How are freedom of expression, well-being and cultural safety balanced?*
- *What support exists for educators managing challenging classroom dynamics?*

Practical Strategies

- Dialogue facilitation training
- Trauma-informed communication
- Reflective discussion practices
- Restorative approaches
- Conflict navigation support

5. Workforce Culture and Representation

The Racism@Uni study highlights concerns regarding leadership diversity, cultural load and inequitable workplace experiences.

Reflection Questions

- *Does leadership reflect the diversity of the broader university community?*
- *How is cultural load recognised and addressed?*
- *What barriers may affect progression and retention?*
- *How are racial literacy and cultural capability embedded within recruitment and leadership development?*
- *Are staff who experience racism meaningfully included in decision-making?*

Reflection Prompt

Who is most visible within leadership and governance spaces?
Who may still be underrepresented or excluded?

Practical Actions for Universities

Examples include:

- Embedding anti-racist practice within strategic planning
- Strengthening trauma-informed support systems
- Improving cultural safety capability across teams
- Implementing racial literacy professional learning
- Reviewing reporting and complaints pathways
- Strengthening accountability and transparency
- Improving representation and participation in leadership spaces
- Embedding reflective practice into governance and decision-making

Team Reflection Activity

Reflect Together

Use the reflective questions below during leadership meetings, professional learning or planning sessions to help guide dialogue.

- 1. What currently supports psychological and cultural safety within our institution?*
- 2. Where might staff or students experience barriers to participation or belonging?*
- 3. How confident are staff in responding appropriately to racism or discrimination?*
- 4. What institutional practices may unintentionally reinforce exclusion or inequity?*
- 5. What practical actions could strengthen safety, accountability and inclusion?*

Closing Reflection

Creating anti-racist university environments requires more than statements of commitment or intent.

It requires ongoing reflection, accountability, institutional courage and meaningful action.

Universities have the opportunity and responsibility to create environments where students and staff feel safer, respected, supported and able to participate fully within academic and workplace communities.

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