



Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education

YCEDE Safety & Allyship within Higher Education Spaces

Produced as a direct result of feedback from some of our PGRs feeling excluded at one of our own events, this comprehensive guidance was developed in collaboration with our Scholars Board, in order to outline our expectations of ourselves and our attendees at events. It also addresses wider issues and things to consider around allyship, positionality, and intersectionality.

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YCEDE cannot guarantee that all information contained in this resource is accurate at the time of reading, particularly with regard to dates, deadlines, and funding availability.

Suggested Audience: Students / Staff

Suggested Sub-Audience: PGRs / Academic Staff / Professional Services Staff

This resource is intended for use in improving equity and outcomes for ethnically minoritised individuals interested in doctoral study or careers in research.

This resource was produced by the staff named above on behalf of the YCEDE project. Please ensure appropriate credits are clearly included in any external use of this resource.

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Yorkshire Consortium for
Equity in Doctoral Education

YCEDE Safety and Allyship within Higher Education Spaces

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Executive Summary

In response to feedback from staff and PGRs at a summer conference, YCEDE has committed to strengthening its role in active anti-racism, moving beyond a stance of non-racism to ensure that racially minoritised colleagues within its institutes and beyond feel prioritised, valued, and protected. This guidance document explores key concepts such as ‘safe spaces,’ courageous discussions, and active allyship, offering those within the higher education sector an opportunity to reflect on their positionality and deepen their commitment to fostering anti-racist workplaces.

Preliminary scoping activities revealed a critical gap in workplace safety documents—while many provide general safety statements, few offer tangible strategies to support racially marginalised staff effectively. Rather than solely supplying safety statement templates, this document aims to equip readers with the tools for self-reflection and practical mechanisms for active anti-racism. This work builds upon the YCEDE 2024 Safety Statement, adapted from the Anti-Racist Working Group Safety Statement, to provide actionable guidance.

Contextualised by insights from our June 2024 conference and against the background of the shocking UK Race Riots of summer 2024, this document underscores the urgent need for institutional change. Key elements include the de-centring of white discomfort, confronting personal biases, and embracing discomfort as a necessary catalyst for personal and societal growth. Our commitment extends beyond our immediate institutions to ensure the safety, wellbeing, and empowerment of students, colleagues, and the broader community.

A significant challenge identified in our feedback was the frequent overshadowing of contributions from racially marginalised students and staff by senior members. This underscores the persistent barriers to meaningful anti-racism efforts within Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and Higher Education (HE) settings. Even as a leading racial equity organisation, YCEDE continues to navigate these challenges. This document affirms that a commitment to non-racism is insufficient—true progress demands proactive and sustained anti-racist action.

This document has been developed by Raj Mann and Adelaide Omitowoju. We have shared with the wider YCEDE team to gain feedback on this document.

Expectations for Participants

Events, meetings, catch-ups

- **Respect:** Treat all participants with respect, regardless of their background, beliefs, or experiences.
- **Active Listening:** Listen attentively to others and be open to different perspectives. The lived experiences of marginalised individuals should be taken on board rather than dismissed by sweeping assumptions of the 'right' answer/solution.
- **Avoiding Microaggressions:** Be mindful of your language and behaviour to avoid microaggressions.
- **Interrupting Bias:** If you witness or experience bias, feel empowered to speak up in a respectful way.



Glossary

These terms are used throughout the text, so this section can serve as a useful reminder of their meaning.

Ally - Describes someone who is not a part of a marginalised group but actively supports and advocates for this group. They play an important role in fostering inclusion and equality ([Clarke, n.d.](#)).

EDI - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Implicit or unconscious bias - An unconscious negative attitude towards a particular social group ([American Psychological Association, 2018](#)).

Imposter syndrome - A psychological phenomenon in which individuals question their skills, abilities, or accomplishments and internally fear being seen as frauds. Despite external proof of their competence, they struggle to believe they deserve their success or status ([NHS Health Education England](#)).

Intersectionality - Term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe how race, gender, class and other specific characteristics overlap. It is the understanding that everyone experiences discrimination and oppression in their own unique way ([Taylor, 2019](#)).

Lived experience - Refers to the first-hand knowledge and insight gained through personally experiencing a situation or event ([Words to describe lived experience work, n.d.](#)).

Microaggression - Subtle yet frequent verbal, nonverbal, or environmental actions—whether intentional or unintentional—that express hostility, bias, or negativity toward individuals based on their marginalised identity ([Sue, 2010](#)).

PGR - Postgraduate Research(er)



Glossary (continued)

Privilege - The unearned advantages tied to aspects of identity, shaping how the world accommodates us. Those from marginalised groups face barriers that privileged individuals may not notice, making privilege visible to some yet unseen by others ([Wright, n.d](#)).

Safe spaces - Environments designed to enhance the safety and visibility of marginalised or oppressed communities. They provide comfort and support while also fostering open dialogue and learning, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage in honest conversations that promote understanding and growth ([Ali, 2017, p.3](#)).

Tick-box diversity - Refers to superficial diversity initiatives that focus on demographic representation rather than meaningful systemic change. It often results in tokenism, where marginalised individuals are hired or promoted for appearances rather than being valued for their unique perspectives. This approach fails to challenge institutional biases, ultimately reinforcing the status quo instead of fostering genuine inclusion and equity ([Anand, 2019](#)). Also known as 'checkbox diversity'.

Tokenism - The superficial inclusion of marginalised individuals in workplaces or organisations to give the appearance of diversity without implementing meaningful systemic change. It often manifests as tick-box diversity ([Anand, 2019](#)).

Trespasser syndrome - A term coined by Professor Leslie Thomas KC to describe the experience of individuals who, despite rightfully belonging in a space, are made to feel like outsiders (or 'trespassers'). Others perceive them as unworthy or out of place, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and marginalisation ([Thomas, 2022, 02:55](#)).

Introduction

In June 2024, YCEDE introduced its Safety Statement, adapted from the Anti-Racist Working Group Safety Statement, to reinforce our commitment to active anti-racism. This initiative aims to ensure inclusivity, particularly for racially minoritised postgraduate research (PGR) students and staff, fostering an environment where all voices are heard and respected. Our work as a leading race equality project is inherently sensitive and relies on extensive collaboration and diverse contributions. Therefore, it is crucial that we prioritise and centre the voices of those with lived experience, ensuring they influence and guide our work effectively.

This guidance outlines the rationale behind our commitment to creating safe and inclusive spaces for all participants in YCEDE events, meetings and spaces in more detail than the safety statement. We urge all individuals working within higher education spaces, especially those who work alongside post-graduate and early career researchers, to read and reflect on the below.

Key Learnings and Observations

Our summer conference feedback highlighted the continued challenges faced by racially minoritised participants, including instances where their contributions were overshadowed by senior members - a stark reminder of the unequal power dynamics that exist within the higher education sector. This highlights the need for continuous reflection and enhancement of our inclusivity practices. Additionally, it is crucial to educate colleagues and the wider community on redefining and strengthening perceptions of safety within EDI spaces and beyond, ensuring racially marginalised staff and students feel empowered to contribute their lived experiences without fear of being silenced or ignored. We acknowledge the emotional burden placed on those who share their experiences and see this as an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to amplifying, valuing and protecting these voices.

Context and Urgency

The 2024 UK race riots reinforced the urgent necessity for anti-racism efforts at all levels and served as a reminder of the need to move beyond non-racism and towards active anti-racism. While non-racism expresses shock and sympathy at such events, active anti-racism requires tangible action, policy changes, and active, concrete allyship. These events also underscore the critical need for clear and actionable policies on creating and ensuring anti-racist and inclusive environments.

YCEDE recognises the impact of these events on racially marginalised PGR students and colleagues and calls for action to ensure they feel safe and supported in contributing their perspectives within and beyond institutional settings. Through this document, YCEDE provides a framework to drive meaningful, institutional change.

The Role of Discomfort in Learning

Engaging in anti-racism work requires confronting personal biases and embracing discomfort as a means of growth - both personal and societal ([Woolley, 2022](#)).

While discomfort can be challenging, it is essential for deconstructing systemic racism and fostering genuine allyship. Prioritising the needs of racially minoritised individuals over temporary discomfort is fundamental to meaningful change and is a crucial action point of this document ([Rollock, 2018, p. 319-321](#)).

Our Commitment to Safety

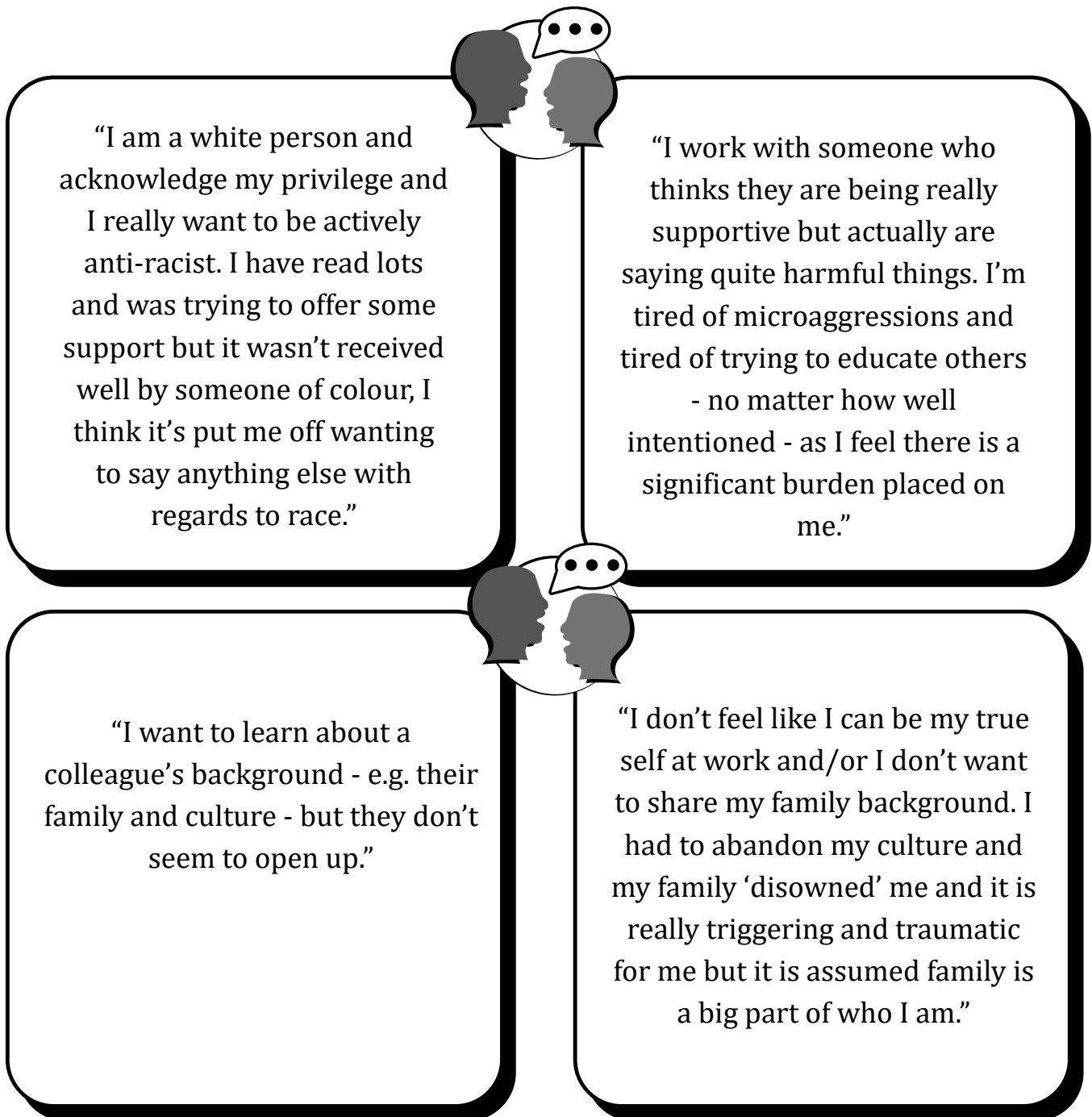
- **Safe Spaces and Brave Conversations:** Creating environments where open, respectful, and brave discussions about racism can occur.
- **Psychological Safety and Wellbeing:** Ensuring participants feel secure in sharing their experiences without fear of repercussions.
- **Active Allyship:** Encouraging all participants to recognize privilege, challenge discrimination, and support racial equity efforts.

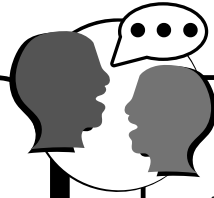
YCEDE remains dedicated to fostering a culture of anti-racism through continuous learning, self-reflection, and meaningful action. We urge all our members to engage deeply with our guidance and commit to active allyship in their daily practices.

Different perspectives on the same scenario:

We present these perspectives as a starting point for examining the complex issues of race and diversity in the workplace.

Marginalised individuals often carry the emotional burden of addressing racism and educating others about racial issues, regardless of their willingness. To address these challenges, it is essential to create inclusive environments that respect boundaries and support the wellbeing of all employees equally.





"I want to avoid making assumptions about my colleagues based on their race, but sometimes I catch myself doing it unconsciously but as it's unconscious bias, there is nothing I can do about it."

"As a person of colour, I'm often subjected to stereotypes and assumptions about my abilities and interests. It's frustrating and limiting. I wish people would do some more learning and training to overcome their biases which are instilled in systems and common practices".

What concrete actions can 'active allies' take to meaningfully contribute to racial justice and equity and demonstrate their commitment to anti-racism in the workplace?



Challenging Microaggressions and Active Allyship

Microaggressions

#ItsNotMicro found that 83% of ethnically minoritised people experience microaggressions in the workplace, but only 16% of microaggressions are called out (Race Equality Matters 5 Day Challenge, p.16).

Microaggressions are subtle, sometimes unintentional, everyday insults or slights that communicate negative attitudes towards marginalised groups. These can be verbal, behavioural, or environmental. Such actions contribute to systemic discrimination and can cause significant harm to those targeted. It is therefore crucial to create a supportive environment where colleagues feel safe to call out microaggressions.

To address this, individuals can adopt the role of active allies or bystanders. Allies actively support marginalised groups and challenge microaggressions, while bystanders can intervene by making the microaggression visible, confronting the offender, or seeking external help (Sue et al., 2019). The ARISE Model (Ackerman-Barger and Jacobs, 2020) guides bystanders who witness microaggressions on actions they can take to play a crucial role in addressing racism and creating a more inclusive environment (examples adapted from Ackerman-Barger and Jacobs, 2020):

1. Awareness: Be mindful of the situation and use perspective-taking to understand the impact on the recipient.
2. Respond with Empathy and Avoid Judgment: Approach the situation with empathy and avoid judging the source. Everyone has implicit bias, and the goal is to learn and grow together.
3. Inquiry: Ask open-ended questions to understand the source's perspective and intent. For example, "What did you mean by that?" or "Can you explain what you mean by that comment?"
4. Statements that Start with I: Use "I" statements to express your observations, feelings, and concerns. For example, "I noticed that X seemed offended/ upset by the comment you made" or "I think that was an inappropriate comment to make."
5. Educate and Engage: Help the source understand the impact of their words and work towards a common goal of inclusivity. For example, "I know you might not

have meant to stereotype X, but as your friend/ colleague, I want you to know that what you said could be interpreted that way.”

It is equally as important for individuals to recognise if they have been the source of a microaggression. The source is the person who has caused the microaggression, often (but not always) unknowingly due to unconscious bias. The ASSIST Model ([Ackerman-Barger and Jacobs, 2020](#)) provides a framework for individuals who have inadvertently committed microaggressions (examples adapted from [Ackerman-Barger and Jacobs, 2020](#)):

1. **Acknowledge Your Bias:** Recognise that unconscious bias can lead to microaggressions. Seek out diverse perspectives and experiences to reduce bias.
2. **Seek Feedback:** Listen actively to the recipient's feelings and ask for honest feedback. For example, “I noticed that you became quiet when we were speaking about X. Would you like to share how you’re feeling about it?”
3. **Say You Are Sorry:** Apologise for the impact of your actions, regardless of intent.
4. **Impact, Not Intent:** Focus on understanding the recipient's experience and the harm caused, rather than defending your actions. For example, “I didn’t intend to cause harm with my comment, but I now realise how it may have affected you and I am really sorry.”
5. **Say Thank You:** Express gratitude to the recipient for their feedback and commitment to your growth. For example, “Thank you, I really appreciate you taking the time to help me learn.”

Allyship

Allyship (see note on language below) is an ongoing process where individuals from privileged social groups actively work to challenge discrimination and bias, and support and empower racially-marginalised communities. It's about using your privilege to create a more equitable environment for everyone ([Barley, 2021](#)). Being an ally involves understanding your own biases, speaking up against injustice, and taking action to dismantle systemic inequalities. Instead of sitting back or leaving it to someone else, active allyship encourages individuals to make a conscious effort to notice and challenge instances of discrimination, no matter how ‘micro’ ([Sue et al., 2019](#); [#ItsNotMicro](#); [Epler et al., 2021](#)).

Addressing microaggressions by being an active ally (also see ARISE/ASSIST models above):

If you witness a microaggression → Challenge the person by asking them to clarify what they meant. This gives them a chance to learn and correct their mistakes → This raises awareness for everyone about potentially harmful language, even if unintentional.

The Do's and Don'ts

What does being an active ally look like at HE events and meetings?

The Do's:

- **Notice and challenge bias:** Be aware of your own biases and those of others. If you see or hear something that seems biased or unfair, speak up in a respectful way and if you feel that you are unable to do this, bring this to the attention of someone else who can support you to do so, or report it so that it can be followed up and not repeated.
- **Amplify marginalised voices:** Encourage and support participation from underrepresented groups. Listen actively to their perspectives and experiences.
- **Educate yourself:** Be willing to learn about different cultures, identities, and experiences. There are many resources available to help you on this journey (see resources below).
- **Interrupt microaggressions:** If you witness a microaggression, don't be afraid to speak up and challenge it.
- **Use your privilege:** If you hold a position of power or privilege, use it to advocate for change such as for the implementation of the Race Equality Charter (REC)
- **Be an active bystander:** ARISE model (above). Don't be silent in the face of discrimination. Stand up for what is right, even if it feels uncomfortable.
- **Be patient and persistent:** Creating a more just and equitable world takes time and effort. Don't give up!

The Don'ts:

- **Tokenism:** This can often be mistaken for diversity, but does not equate to meaningful or lasting inclusion or equity. A commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion involves empowering, valuing, and providing equitable opportunities for everyone.
- **Tick-boxing in recruitment:** Rather than just fulfilling diversity quotas, actively recognise and appreciate the contributions of racially marginalised colleagues and PGRs and support their professional development (see below for further discussion).
- **Use diverse friends/ family as an example of your understanding**
- **Expect to be taught:** Take it upon yourself to actively learn and educate yourself on the realities faced by your racially minoritised peers
- **Take credit for the labour of those who are marginalised**
- Assume that every racially marginalised person wants to talk about racism and/or oppression
- **Performative allyship:** Instead of participating in superficial displays of support for marginalised individuals, take meaningful action to address issues.



Language

Language is a dynamic tool that shapes and is shaped by our experiences, identities and perspectives. To dismantle systems of oppression, we must challenge the language that upholds them. We at YCEDE recognise the contentious nature of terms such as 'allyship' and 'privilege', as they can reinforce harmful power dynamics and place a burden on racially-marginalised groups ([Abdi, 2024](#)). We use these terms as a means of examining/ highlighting the connection between allyship and recognising and actively addressing the inequalities that exist within our society ([Barley, 2021](#)).

Language and categorisation: 'BAME' or 'BME'

The language we use to describe race and ethnicity plays a vital role in fostering inclusion, representation and understanding. The terms BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) and BME (Black and minority ethnic) have been widely used for many years, however since 2021 when the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities recommended that the UK government stop using these “aggregated” and “unhelpful” categorisations, there has been a move away from their use due to a recognition of their reductionist nature.

These terms are criticised for emphasising certain groups, such as Black and Asian, while excluding others including mixed, other and White ethnic minority groups ([Ethnicity Facts and Figures, 2024](#)). Additionally, they mask disparities between different ethnic groups and lead to misleading interpretations of data. For example a report by Public Health England about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, used the term BAME 217 times without providing a clear definition, raising concerns about who was being included within “BAME communities” and therefore the accuracy of the data ([Sahi, 2024](#)). This was reinforced by research commissioned by the Race Disparity Unit (RDU) found that people from ethnic minorities were three times more likely to agree than disagree that the term ‘BAME’ was unhelpful.

YCEDE recognises that collective terms often oversimplify complex identities and diversity, grouping distinct experiences and identities under a single umbrella term while ignoring the unique histories and cultural differences that exist ([Race Equality Matters, 2023](#)). This underscores the importance of recognising intersectionality and the varying experiences within and between ethnic and racial groups. Therefore, while



there may be no universal alternative to collective terms, it is essential we strive to use specific, clear language that recognises and respects individual identities and experiences, rather than relying on homogeneous groupings.

Organisations and institutions should prioritise disaggregating data, explaining acronyms fully in all communications and seek input from those the language aims to represent to ensure it is more inclusive and appropriate (Sahi, 2024; [Advance HE](#)). As Race Equality Matters (2023) notes, "**terminology is the start of the conversation, not the end**" and thoughtful and inclusive language is essential for meaningful discussions about race and ethnicity.

YCEDE and Language

This document uses the terminology racially or ethnically marginalised or minoritised to discuss racial and ethnic groups, however we recognise the problematic nature of any homogenising language.

When asking about ethnicity or ethnic background for data collection purposes, YCEDE ensures that categories are disaggregated to highlight the experiences of different minority ethnic groups in as much detail as possible. We also ensure there is the option to self-identify, ensuring that each individual's identity is accurately represented.

The YCEDE approach aims to respect and acknowledge the diversity within racial and ethnic groups, promoting a more inclusive and accurate understanding of their experiences. We are committed to fostering safety and allyship in HE spaces by recognising and addressing the complexities of racial and ethnic identities.

Moving beyond ‘tick-box’ diversity, equality and inclusion

**“Companies can ‘hit the target, but miss the point’ - improve diversity statistics without improving DEI [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion]”
(Edmans, Flammer and Glossner, 2023, p.4,)**

To foster a truly inclusive workplace, we must move beyond mere compliance with EDI guidelines. Rather than viewing these as a box to tick, institutions should aim to create a genuine culture of belonging, where diverse perspectives are valued and supported. Tick-box approaches to EDI, often characterised by superficial exercises like quotas or diversity training with little follow-through, can have tangible negative consequences for marginalised colleagues, including undervaluing their contributions and limiting career opportunities (CIPD, 2017; McGregor-Smith, 2017; Diversity by Design, 2018). Similarly, while symbolic gestures such as badges and posters can serve as a starting point for conversations and raise awareness of EDI issues, they often fall short of addressing systemic discrimination, expanding opportunities, or driving meaningful institutional change. A more effective approach is to adopt a purpose-driven strategy, aligning EDI initiatives with broader goals (Diversity by Design, 2018).

Key signs of a lack of genuine commitment to EDI:

- Tokenism: A lack of diversity in leadership positions or key decision-making roles.
- Vague EDI Goals: Ambiguous or non-existent EDI objectives.
- Policy-Practice Discrepancy: A mismatch between stated EDI policies and actual workplace practices.
- Mishandling of Incidents: Failure to address incidents of discrimination or harassment effectively.
- Cultural Insensitivity: A lack of awareness or appreciation for diverse cultures and perspectives.

To drive meaningful change, organisations must hold leadership accountable for creating equitable and inclusive environments ([Armes, 2022](#)). Active commitment to EDI requires a top-down approach, with leaders actively promoting and participating in EDI initiatives, setting clear expectations, and ensuring that equity is at the heart of all workplace practices.

Various studies, including those conducted by [Deloitte](#), have demonstrated that inclusive workplaces offer significant benefits, including:

- **Increased innovation:** Diverse perspectives lead to more creative and innovative solutions.
- **Improved employee satisfaction:** Employees who feel valued and respected are more engaged and productive.
- **Enhanced organisational performance:** A diverse and inclusive workforce can drive business growth and success.

Positionality

Positionality refers to an individual's location in relation to their numerous social identities, including but not limited to gender, race, class, ethnicity, ability and geographical location. These elements shape their identity, experiences, knowledge, interactions and worldview (Alcoff 1988 taken from [Queens University, 2023](#)).

Learning to regularly examine our own unique positionality, perspective, and bias is crucial not only for personal development but for creating safe environments for those around us who may not benefit from the same privileges. This process can be challenging and uncomfortable, but acknowledging that we may benefit from systems that create privilege is essential to dismantling systems of oppression/ systemic inequalities ([Homan, 2023](#)).

In the workplace, this can look like considering and addressing our own positionality leading up to an event, meeting, discussion or when releasing a piece of research.

See examples of positionality statements [here](#).

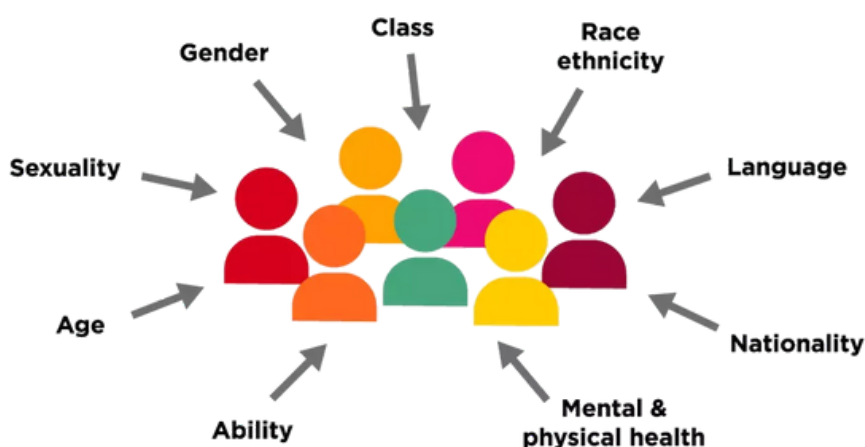


Figure 1: Anti-Racism, EDI, and Positionality – positionality and intersecting identities. University of Calgary.

Intersectionality

The term "intersectionality" describes how different identities, such as race, gender, religion and social class, can overlap and, in the context of systemic oppression, amplify each other. By addressing intersectional identities in isolation, we fail to acknowledge the numerous and intricate ways in which different forms of oppression can impact minoritised individuals. This can enhance processes of marginalisation and make it challenging for individuals with multiple identities to be heard and understood.

Intersectionality plays a crucial role in creating safe and inclusive workplaces. When ignored, it can contribute to a sense of isolation and exclusion for colleagues and students with multiple marginalised identities and reinforce prevalent patterns of racial discrimination (Intersectionality in Focus, n.d.; Inclusive Employers). To create truly inclusive and safe spaces, privileged white individuals must acknowledge the power of intersectionality and actively work to understand and address the unique challenges faced by individuals with intersecting identities. Only by doing so can we achieve truly equitable and 'safe' spaces where everyone is given the same rights and opportunities.

Hierarchies

Institutional hierarchies often reinforce the idea that certain staff members are inherently superior to others based on factors such as tenure status, position or discipline but also include social identities. These hierarchies often perpetuate stereotypes, biases and unequal treatment, disproportionately impacting marginalised individuals ([Besette, 2021](#)).

Institutional hierarchies - influenced by structural racial inequity - often allow individual acts of racism to be overlooked or dealt with less effectively, allowing for the continuation of cycles of discrimination and prejudice ([Advance HE, 2021](#)).

“Seemingly slight or even trivial acts serve to position faculty of colour at the margins of institutional spaces which continue to ignore, downplay or deny their experiences and the salience of race” ([Rollock 2018, p.319](#)).

To address these issues, it is vital that we challenge microaggressions and recognise the value of the perspectives and lived experiences of racially marginalised individuals in all spaces. By championing these voices we can begin to promote a culture of diversity, mutual respect and inclusion. We also enrich our discussions and conversations, challenging traditional perceptions of power and knowledge distribution within academic settings.

Some of YCEDE’s PGRs and other racially minoritised students have fed back that it can be intimidating to converse with or question something written or said by academics, even more so when academics use their titles. Examples of this include introducing oneself with an academic background focus when a setting does not require it. This reminder of the hierarchies within academia can be problematic when we consider that many PGRs feel that academia is the only career option presented to them during PhD study, even when they have expressed interest in working outside of academia. Some PGRs have organised events and meetings which are ‘title free’, which allows all voices to be equal and heard. This might be something to consider when trying to eradicate inequalities and feelings of imposter syndrome and trespasser syndrome.

As an extension of examining our own positionality (see above section on positionality) and privilege, it is important to consider institutional hierarchies.

Further Discussion

We are committed to continually improving our safety practices. We will use feedback from participants to inform our approach to creating safe and inclusive spaces.

We encourage participants to discuss any questions or concerns they may have about safety and allyship with the YCEDE team.

Reflection Activity



ACTIVITY (2 Minutes)

Now you have read all of this, please spend a minute to reflect on your positionality and privilege (or lack of) and write a sentence on how you will ensure you will ensure active anti-racism will be at the centre of your contributions.



**Yorkshire Consortium for
Equity in Doctoral Education**

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