



AUSTRALIA'S SPECIAL ENVOY TO COMBAT ISLAMOPHOBIA

Aftab Malik
Special Envoy to Combat Islamophobia
GPO Box 9984
Sydney
NSW 2001
Australia

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Professor John Pollaers OAM

Convenor, University Chancellors Council
On behalf of the Social Licence Steering Committee
Via email: secretariat@ucc.edu.au

Dear Professor Pollaers,

Re: Submission for the Social Licence Steering Committee – Priority Area: Strengthening Safety, Inclusion, and Dialogue on Campus

I am writing to thank you for inviting me to contribute to the important work of the Social Licence Steering Committee, established by the University Chancellors Council (UCC) and Universities Australia (UA). I commend the commitment of this initiative to fostering public trust and ensuring the long-term sustainability of Australia's universities through ongoing engagement with students, staff, communities, and broader society.

Please find enclosed my submission addressing the first priority area: Strengthening Safety, Inclusion, and Dialogue on Campus. In this response, I have provided a number of considerations for the Committee aimed at enhancing safety and fostering an inclusive environment that encourages open dialogue among all campus members. I believe that these measures will support the development of a campus culture rooted in respect, safety, and mutual understanding, which are vital components of maintaining and strengthening our sector's social licence.

For further enquiries regarding my submission or information, please do not hesitate to contact my office via email at: info@oseci.gov.au, or visit the website at www.oseci.gov.au.

Yours sincerely,

Aftab Malik



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Strengthening Safety, Inclusion, and Dialogue on Campus

General Comment

Universities have an urgent responsibility to create active learning environments in which students have opportunities to engage in respectful discussion, in which inclusion is a non-negotiable framing norm rather than a line item in aspirational policies. In doing so, they will not only protect their social licence but uphold the fundamental values of open inquiry, and mutual respect upon which higher education depends. Inclusion and safety must not be treated as 'initiatives' but as standing commitments backed with resources and transparent reporting structures, thus ensuring structural accountability. Australia's universities must actively work to reestablish their social licence and work to maintain it. This means confronting uncomfortable truths, committing to systemic change, and enshrining dialogue, respect, and safety as foundational principles, not reactionary afterthoughts, that are at the core of the way the university educates and operates.

1. [What policies and initiatives have been most effective in addressing antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination on campus?](#)

In discussions with university staff and Muslim students, perspectives on effective policies and initiatives to address Islamophobia, vary. Some advocate for a universal policy statement that clearly articulates a commitment to combating discrimination, bias, and bigotry. Such an approach aims to transcend contentious definitions by framing these issues under the broader, unifying principles of anti-racism or dehumanisation, emphasising shared values that unite us rather than divisions based on identity.

Conversely, others recognise that although overarching frameworks are important, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination have distinct origins and manifestations. They argue that tailored, specific strategies are necessary to effectively address the unique content and challenge of each issue.

Regardless of the approach, there are three elements that will be essential to ensure that initiatives to address discrimination on campus will be impactful:

- **Proactive education:** Clear, compulsory modules that openly discuss discrimination, racism, religious prejudice, and the structures that contribute to such attitudes. This needs to be sensitively built into core curriculum design. It must be part of the very fabric of moral and civic education.
- **Visible leadership:** Senior management must make public, unequivocal statements condemning all forms of hatred and discrimination when they arise - not selectively, but universally.
- **Community building:** Programs that connect diverse student cohorts through shared cultural, religious, or ethical inquiry (e.g. interfaith roundtables or ethics cafes) help dismantle othering.

Efforts to combat discrimination must cultivate a deep and broad commitment among students and staff to equity and justice - one that allows specific harms to be addressed while avoiding competitive victimhood.



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2. How can universities better educate students and staff on respectful dialogue and behaviours, and managing conflict in a diverse environment?

Students need to practice respectful dialogue and have it modelled for them by others, including their teachers and peers. Students should be taught how they should conduct themselves in open-minded, well-reasoned, and civil conversation with others, in their efforts to rationally evaluate the questions and possibilities raised by the great works that they critically examine together.

As Martha Nussbaum observes in *Not for Profit*, democracy needs citizens “who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements” (p. 2). Explicating key themes from her 1998 classic, *Cultivating Humanity*, she reminds us that what we need, most of all, are citizens “who can reason together about their choices rather than just trading claims and counterclaims”. Opportunities to engage in collective dialogue which aim at achieving a common understanding or investigation of an important topic (the nature of truth, selfhood, justice), rather than individuals advancing their own agendas - which is a centrepiece of a liberal arts education - helps to create students who are able “to speak in their own voices and to respect the voices of others” (Nussbaum 1994).

Cultivating respectful dialogue and how to take intelligent and skillful risks, requires:

- Pedagogical training in dialogical methods that encourage students to explore disagreement without descending into hostility or dogmatism.
- Institutionally supported, philosophically deep, public discussions - not staged as debates as such - or other moderated forums where students learn the value of considered and respectful reasoned exchange.

To unpack this further, consider the following:

1. Universities should include respectful dialogue, intercultural understanding, and conflict resolution particularly in first-year orientation and core subjects. Teaching these skills early, helps students navigate diverse perspectives and backgrounds with empathy and respect, building a stronger, more inclusive university community. These programs can equip students with practical tools for engaging across difference in ways that uphold dignity and mutual understanding.

Practical examples:

- Incorporate real-world or hypothetical case studies involving intercultural misunderstandings or ethical dilemmas that require students to engage in respectful dialogue.
- Run mandatory workshops during orientation that introduce students to core principles of respectful dialogue and intercultural awareness. Use trained facilitators (including students with lived experience) to run activities that simulate conflict and cooperation in diverse groups.
- Include assessment tasks that require students to reflect on or apply principles of inclusive dialogue. These can be written reflections, presentations, or group assignments.
- Ensure that readings, lectures, and examples include diverse cultural, religious, and social perspectives. This normalises diversity and encourages respectful engagement.



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- Design collaborative projects that require students from diverse backgrounds to work together, with structured reflection on group dynamics and communication. Provide guidance on inclusive teamwork norms. Also consider co-designing programs with faith-based student groups.
- Adopt pedagogies such as dialogue circles, or fishbowl discussions that prioritise active listening, non-defensive response, and mutual respect.
- Offer brief modules or embedded sessions within courses that introduce basic skills in managing interpersonal conflict, such as active listening, de-escalation, and perspective-taking.
- Develop or adopt interactive online modules (perhaps scenario-based) that simulate intercultural interactions or conflict situations.

2. Staff training should go beyond compliance-based diversity workshops and offer regular, reflective professional development on inclusive teaching, de-escalation strategies, unconscious bias, and dialogue facilitation.

Practical examples:

- Establish ongoing “inclusive teaching sessions” within each faculty or school where academic staff meet regularly (e.g. monthly) to reflect on classroom dynamics, workshop challenges, and co-develop inclusive teaching practices. This can be case study discussions drawn from real student feedback; peer observations followed by collegial, confidential feedback; or sharing resources on accessibility and cultural inclusivity.
- Provide practical, discipline-specific workshops using role-play and scenario-based learning focused on de-escalating classroom tensions. Examples include: simulations involving students challenging assessment fairness, cultural insensitivity, or group work conflict; strategies for responding non-defensively and redirecting conflict constructively; or debrief sessions to reflect on emotional responses and bias.
- Offer staff a structured program in dialogue facilitation, co-designed with external experts or community organisations (e.g. those with experience in interfaith or intercultural dialogue). This may include core principles of active listening, neutrality, and managing power dynamics; techniques for facilitating discussion on difficult or identity-sensitive topics in class, opportunities to practice and receive feedback in a safe environment.
- Go beyond standard online unconscious bias modules by offering interactive workshops paired with follow-up reflection groups. This may include a workshop exploring the neuroscience of bias and real-time decision-making; or small group discussion sessions led by trained facilitators to share insights and challenges.

3. Universities should support peer-facilitated initiatives, such as intercultural dialogue circles, student ambassador programs, and safe spaces for discussing contentious issues. These can build trust, challenge stereotypes, and foster empathy.

Practical examples:

- Establish regular student-led dialogue circles where small, diverse groups of students meet to discuss themes such as identity, belonging, race, religion, and global issues in a structured, respectful environment.



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- Develop or expand student ambassador programs that train culturally diverse students to serve as facilitators, peer mentors, and inclusion champions.
- Launch a “Brave Spaces” initiative where students co-host structured conversations on controversial or difficult topics in a safe, moderated setting. Examples of topics: race and privilege on campus; freedom of expression vs. hate speech etc.
- Recruit and train a group of student volunteers to act as peer mediators or dialogue facilitators in situations of intercultural or interpersonal tension.

4. Educating the community requires not just positive training but also clarity about behavioural expectations. Universities should ensure that codes of conduct are well-publicised and paired with transparent procedures for responding to discrimination or conflict.

Practical examples:

- Ensure that university codes of conduct are written in clear, student-friendly language.
- Publish codes prominently on key university platforms -student portals, staff onboarding pages, course outlines, and physical posters in shared spaces.
- Use real-life scenarios to explain what counts as discrimination, racism, harassment, or disrespectful behaviour - and what students/staff should do in response. Campaigns should clarify both rights and responsibilities, using accessible language and real examples.
- Provide multiple, confidential pathways for reporting incidents (e.g. online, in person, anonymously). Make reporting platforms easy to find and user-friendly, with guidance on what happens after a report is made.
- Ensure that investigation and resolution processes are culturally sensitive, and aim to restore safety and learning wherever possible. Where appropriate, use restorative justice or facilitated dialogue approaches to resolve lower-level or first-time incidents, alongside disciplinary action for serious breaches.
- Regularly review codes and processes in consultation with student and staff diversity groups to ensure policies remain relevant, inclusive, and trusted.

5. Leadership at all levels (academic, administrative, and student) must model respectful engagement and champion diversity. This helps to foster a campus culture where respectful dialogue is normalised and valued.

Practical examples:

- Make inclusive leadership a formal expectation in position descriptions, KPIs, and performance reviews for all university leaders.
- Academic and administrative leaders should regularly attend, support, and speak at events related to cultural diversity, gender equity, reconciliation, and student wellbeing. Their participation should be authentic and ongoing, that is, not symbolic or one-off.
- In meetings, classrooms, and public communications, leaders should demonstrate inclusive practices: acknowledging country, inviting diverse perspectives, correcting exclusionary language, and managing disagreement respectfully.



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- Leaders should advocate for funding and institutional support for programs that promote equity and respectful engagement, such as mentoring for underrepresented students or intercultural peer programs.
- When conflicts involving racism, discrimination, or disrespect arise, leaders must respond quickly, transparently, and empathetically, demonstrating the university's values in action.
- Proactively mentor and support students and staff from diverse backgrounds into leadership roles through shadowing, coaching, and dedicated programs.

3. What training do students and/or staff receive to ensure there is a strong understanding of differences? I.e. cultural training, neurodiversity and accessibility training, consent training.

Currently, the extent of training provided to students and staff on understanding and navigating differences appears limited. Existing programs often lack the depth necessary to equip individuals with the skills required for meaningful and sensitive engagement in difficult conversations. When in-person training is offered, it is crucial that these sessions are delivered in a safe environment and facilitated by qualified professionals with expertise in psychological trauma and trauma-informed practices.

Particularly for students who have experienced racism or discrimination, recounting their experiences in front of others can be re-traumatising. Therefore, training should incorporate modules that address cultural identity, faith, accessibility, and neurodiversity. Additionally, scenario-based learning derived from real cases of digital discrimination, as well as storytelling sessions by students from diverse faith communities, can foster empathy and understanding.

Overall, comprehensive and sensitive training is essential to create an inclusive campus environment where difficult conversations can occur respectfully and constructively.

4. What measures should be taken to ensure clear, accessible, supportive, and trusted reporting and complaints mechanisms for students experiencing unacceptable or unsafe behaviour?

There is a widespread perception among Muslim students that existing reporting mechanisms lack trustworthiness, primarily because reports are often perceived as unresponsive or mishandled. Students have expressed concerns that their reports are handled in a “clumsy” manner, leading to a reluctance to come forward. This issue is compounded in the context where Muslim students increasingly distrust university processes, undermining the effectiveness of reporting systems and eroding the necessary trust for these mechanisms to function properly.

To establish clear, accessible, supportive, and trusted reporting and complaints processes, consider:

- Simplified reporting pathways: Many students are deterred by what are perceived to be convoluted or bureaucratic systems. Universities should provide a single, well-publicised point of access for initial complaints, triaged by independent officers trained and experienced in mediation and conflict resolution. Data on complaints and resolutions should be openly shared to promote procedural legitimacy and confidence among the university community.
- Non-punitive early intervention by professional officers: Not all harmful behaviours require formal disciplinary action. A non-escalating restorative justice model can be effective for educational correction in some cases.



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- Protection against retaliation: Reporting should demonstrably not be a career- or degree-risking choice for students or staff. Anonymous reporting channels may help to encourage disclosures without fear of reprisal.

Additionally, transparency around the handling of reports, along with regular monitoring and publicly available data on diversity and inclusion issues, is essential to foster accountability and reinforce trust.

5. What practices have you seen work well for communicating universities' commitment to student safety and inclusion in a way that builds confidence and trust? Do you know of any best practice models nationally or internationally?

Universities effectively communicate their commitment to student safety and inclusion through publicly available policies that articulate their strategic values, principles, and responsibilities. These commitments are then operationalised within key strategic and operational plans. Transparency is further reinforced through ongoing monitoring and reporting on diversity and inclusion metrics. Additionally, adopting universal design principles in curriculum development can foster a more inclusive and accessible environment for all students.

To strengthen this communication, consider:

- The co-creation of charters involving both staff and students, explicitly affirming a zero-tolerance stance on hate and harassment.
- Leveraging social media storytelling—particularly narratives drawn from students' and staff lived experiences—can humanise and amplify the message of inclusion and safety.
- Regular inclusion audits conducted by interdisciplinary researchers specialising in digital and social psychology can provide valuable insights and ensure continuous improvement in fostering an inclusive campus culture.

6. How can universities work with student organisations, interfaith groups, and community leaders to foster a culture of inclusivity and constructive discourse?

Universities should demonstrate genuine listening and responsiveness to faith and community leaders, ensuring their perspectives are meaningfully integrated into institutional decision-making.

To foster a culture of inclusivity and constructive discourse, universities can collaborate closely with student organisations and community leaders through ongoing consultation and co-design processes, embodying the principle of “nothing about us without us”. Governance structures such as committees and advisory boards should be inclusive and representative, ensuring engagement with diverse community groups. Furthermore, engaging with interfaith groups supports the promotion of interfaith dialogue, seeking common ground, and building bridges of understanding among people of different faiths.

Consider:

- Establishing Campus Pluralism Councils that include interfaith, Indigenous, and multicultural student leaders.
- Supporting and funding student-led initiatives focused on religious literacy, reconciliation, and intercultural competency can further deepen understanding and respect.



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Additionally, maintaining dialogue forums with external civil society organisations helps align campus culture with broader societal norms and values, fostering a more inclusive and respectful community.

7. What are the expectations on academic and professional university staff in the context of promoting and maintaining a healthy and safe learning environment for students?

It is evident that academic and professional staff are experiencing considerable uncertainty regarding their responsibilities in promoting and maintaining a healthy and safe learning environment. Many staff members are unsure of the boundaries of academic freedom, especially when navigating complex or sensitive topics in the classroom. For instance, questions arise about whether specific statements - such as describing Gaza as a genocide, are permissible within academic discourse. Consequently, staff often feel anxious about unintentionally overstepping boundaries, fearing repercussions, while also feeling frustrated by perceived restrictions on free speech.

It is important to recognise that staff can be both agents and targets of exclusionary or harmful discourse. To support them effectively, institutions must provide comprehensive training and institutional protections, particularly when they face populist backlash or other external pressures.

To further provide a healthy and safe learning environment, consider:

- Embedding trauma-informed pedagogy into academic practice to foster respectful and inclusive classroom environments.
- Providing legal and mental health support for staff who experience threats such as doxing or disinformation attacks, safeguarding their well-being and professional integrity.

Professional staff must facilitate inclusive support services that reflect the real needs of students—from providing mental health support for marginalised groups to providing access to prayer spaces and dietary accommodations.

8. What are the expectations of university leadership - governing bodies and/or university senior management - in ensuring and promoting inclusion and safety on university campuses?

University staff have highlighted the critical need for strong, proactive leadership from governing bodies and senior management, emphasising the adoption of a values-based governance model. There is a prevailing sense that staff are often left to navigate complex challenges independently, with concerns about potential retribution or negative consequences for making difficult decisions. Additionally, staff report feeling they are tasked with teaching and fostering inclusion in an environment marked by unprecedented challenges, yet with limited guidance and institutional support. Senior leaders must resist performative or politically expedient responses to campus tensions. They should speak out consistently against all forms of harm, irrespective of political valence, thus ensuring ethical clarity and even-handedness.

To address these issues, consider:

- University leadership, particularly Vice-Chancellors and Chancellors, publicly respond to incidents of hate and discrimination, demonstrating a clear stance against such behaviours.



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- Funding to be allocated for collaborative action research aimed at evaluating current inclusion policies and redesigning them to be more effective, evidence-based, and responsive to the evolving campus climate.

9. Further Considerations

- Academic freedom must not be set in opposition to inclusion. They must be co-articulated. Universities need frameworks that allow for difficult deep discussions without, at the same time, guarding against all forms of harassment and hate speech.
- Staff wellbeing is part of the inclusion equation. Disproportionate emotional labour is often expected from minority academics or staff from historically marginalised communities. Institutions must guard against this and ensure a fairer distribution of pastoral and diversity-related responsibilities.