

Guide to running focus groups discussing anti-racist curriculum

This resource was developed by and for Scottish tertiary institutions as a sector-led and co-produced resource

It was written by working group members of the Students and Staff Voices working group
of the Anti-Racist Curriculum (ARC) project

You just look like you've got a tan.
Do you have hair under your hijab?
Do people eat insects in your country?
I just don't see colour.
I don't think of you as black.

Call it racism.

#CallItRacism



WHY: Rationale for using focus groups

This is a guide to undertaking focus groups with Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff as part of developing an anti-racist curriculum.

Honing in on the last three points from our anti-racism curriculum (ARC) definition – listed below – understanding the daily lived experiences of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff in your organisation is key to any informed action you wish to take around ARC:

- *Where diverse voices are valued and heard, that becomes true not only within the content of our curricula and the pedagogy of our curriculum, but in the makeup of our institutions, and the experiences of the people in them.*
- *Ensuring our Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff see themselves reflected in the curriculum, not as an exception but as a central and valued part of it. Developing a curriculum that truly reflects the world in which our graduates will live in and work in.*
- *Cultivating spaces for people to feel safe to discuss race.*

[What we mean by Anti-Racist Curriculum,](#)
[Planning an Anti-Racist Curriculum.](#)

Focus groups, as a tool of evidence gathering and authentic engagement, are an ideal format for this. As any culture change approach should always be informed and led by the lived experiences and voices of the people it is aiming to impact the most, particularly in a space where those voices have historically not been acknowledged or valued.

While we recognise that other quantitative and qualitative methods have their place in helping to map the full picture of the student and staff experience – focus groups are a powerful tool to engage in nuanced dialogue and responsive questions rather than one-way communication. They allow the gathering



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of first-hand accounts of what it is really like to navigate your institution's learning and teaching spaces as Black, Asian and minority ethnic students/staff. Only through this can assumptions end, and deep listening, reflection, and compassion emerge. We would recommend separate focus groups for students and staff in the first instance and will provide advice for both.

It is important to note here that these conversations (with specifically Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff) are not the only ones to be had around ARC, as everyone needs to be involved in the conversation. And these Black, Asian and minority ethnic-only focus groups, while vital and foundational to your ARC approach, are not actions in and of themselves; it is what you do with the valuable insights you gain from them that will count. The sensitivity and thoughtfulness in how you undertake these focus groups and conversations can be the blueprint for/ substantiate your ARC practice going forward. We would encourage subsequent conversations to continue, with diverse groups, but the focus of this short guide will be on the initial Black, Asian and minority ethnic focus groups.



WHO: Attendees and Chair

Focus group attendees to include any student or staff who self-identifies as Black, Asian, or from a minority ethnic background. Demographics will be specific to your organisation and it is worth understanding those to ensure (where possible) that you engage with all, and especially key, groups within your Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. Being mindful of intersectional considerations (gender/age etc.), study options (part-time, full-time, distance, etc.), and learner stage (UG, PG and doctoral). For staff, all departments should be included from professional services to academic.

Some additional points to consider:

- It is important to remember that Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff are individuals, their experiences are unique to them, regardless of their background.
- While we refer to groups here, we acknowledge that the term 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic' is just one of many varied identities an individual might occupy and it is important not to conflate experiences into 'one narrative'.
- There will be differences between experiences of UK born and international students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, likewise refugees. Studying in Scotland may be their first experience of being a 'minority' group. For others institutional racism may be 'just how things are here'.
- Everyone is on their own personal journey when it comes to ARC.

The Chair role holds a considerable amount of power in these sessions and sets the tone. Having someone who self-identifies as Black, Asian and minority ethnic chairing the focus group hopefully ensures that attendees can feel more comfortable. It also means that the Chair is able to draw on their own lived experiences and share them (where appropriate), taking the part of an active facilitator and part of the discussion rather than simply prompting the conversation. For student focus groups, consider empowering a student to act as Chair and develop their own skills through the opportunity. For staff focus groups, consider the power dynamics at play when appointing a Chair. If you are unable to empower an individual from your own institution to do this, consider whether there may be someone external who can take on this role.

Self-Reflection for Chair:

- It's important you lead by example in the language you use. When preparing, think about how you can best use accessible and inclusive language in your role.
- We all have our own positionality and biases based on our lived experiences. It's critical that you are self-aware and cognisant of any assumptions you may have about the group before you begin, as this may affect your approach to facilitating.
- The wellbeing of the attendees should be the main focus but your own is just as important. Allow yourself time to reflect and digest the emotions that may be evoked by the conversations in the focus groups.
- The topics discussed can be emotive and bring a wide range of views. Ask yourself how comfortable you are with divergent views and be prepared to handle conversations where there isn't unanimous agreement. There is no right or wrong answer nor one way to view things. Be confident and ready to handle conflicts that may arise, guiding the conversations accordingly.



WHAT: The Sessions

What do you want to find out?

OBJECTIVES: It is helpful to identify what your objectives for the focus groups are so that you can design the sessions in the most effective and engaging way. Consider the following questions when planning your objectives:

- What do you want to find out?
- What will you do with this information?
- How will it support your focus group attendees?
- How will it serve your wider ARC objectives?
- What might your potential outputs be?

To set the tone of the sessions, we recommend starting with open introductory questions:

“How has your experience at college/university/organisation been?”

“How has your experience of learning/teaching been impacted by the curriculum design?”

QUESTIONS: It's important to recognise the potential knowledge disparity of attendees regarding the wider conversation when drafting your questions. We suggest framing open questions on lived experiences in the curriculum around the following areas:

- Learning resources (e.g. library; IT; VLE; estates; classroom resources)
- Diverse speakers
- Learning and teaching process (e.g. contact time; independent and group work; class sizes; teaching styles; staff development)
- Assessment and feedback (e.g. marking criteria; consistency of marking; number and type of assessments; choice of assessment; quality and promptness of feedback)
- Student progression and achievement (e.g. the learner journey; personal development plan; links between courses)
- Guidance and support (e.g. careers advice; personal support; counselling; academic support)
- Quality enhancement and assurance (e.g. institution-wide conversations about enhancement; external review; institution-led review; staff observation; survey development; interpretation of student feedback)
- Curriculum (e.g. course content; handbooks; study abroad opportunities; placements; optional and compulsory modules; reading lists)
- Progression and achievement



Other Considerations

DEFINE: Make clear to attendees what the specific focus of discussions will be. You should look to clearly define concepts such as ARC, curriculum design and lived experiences in the curriculum to attendees, perhaps even before the session.

FLOW: ARC is a wide ranging topic and discussions are prone to expansive and tangential deviations. These can be extremely fruitful and powerful so while pre-planned questions are important, allowing attendees to influence the direction of the discussion is equally important.

PLATFORM: With the objectives in mind, consider how you will set up the event. You may wish to start by deciding between virtual or physical delivery. When choosing the former, think about how each platform promotes engagement. Raise hand functions, chat boxes, anonymity (e.g. Zoom allowing users to change their display names), size of the groups and access to equipment are all important aspects to evaluate.

FORMAT: Once you have the means selected, consider the format of the session itself. You should assess how much time you'll need for discussion, how it will be structured and how you can capture any alternative means of engagement. Also consider the time of day for student carers, part-time students and staff with family commitments for example. Also, providing alternative means to engage/attend (on the day and after) is important as it allows participants to engage in the ways they feel most comfortable. If virtual, some may wish not to speak or turn their video on and instead use the chat function. Make sure you consider these in advance and communicate these options effectively. Crucially, you must ensure that those who engage in alternative ways feel they're included in the space and that their contributions are valued.

SAFETY: A comfortable and supportive space is crucial to the discussions. Consider whether you have made it clear at the start that participants can leave discussions if it is distressing and return when they feel comfortable. Continually ask yourself if you have made attendees comfortable, maintaining awareness of body language and speech patterns to adapt your approach as necessary. Be open to being challenged in your approach as a means to your own development. In advance, you should consider the demographics of the group itself, e.g. gender balance, religion, age, and how these may affect the discussions. Be prepared to navigate these when guiding the session.

RECOGNITION: Asking attendees to contribute to focus groups by sharing their lived experiences is asking for their emotional labour. Having means to recognise this can be a powerful way to convey the value and understanding you have for their contribution. This could be some kind of certificate, involvement in the wider project, remuneration via a voucher, the offer of mentoring, or recognition in work allocation models, for example.

NEXT STEPS: Most importantly, make it clear what will be done with the evidence they provide. Outlining the anonymity of the process, such as not using names or direct quotes, helps participants feel comfortable sharing emotions and experiences that can make them feel vulnerable. As well as this, you want to ensure they see the purpose of contributing so they may continue engaging with the work. Closing the feedback loop makes participants feel valued; you may wish to do this by sending a thank you message and summary after the meeting. Other means of closing the feedback loop include sending regular updates to participants on how the work is progressing and scheduling drop-ins or follow-up meetings.



HOW: Communication, Barriers & Enablers

Communication

The first step in undertaking this work is effective communication. Before you begin to promote the focus groups, you may want to consider where you will advertise the sessions. Think of your virtual channels such as e-mail, social media, Virtual Learning Environments, or physical ones like flyers, posters and leaflets.

After selecting your means of dissemination, you should map out what the content of your messaging will be. You'll need to recruit participants for the group and to do so you must explain the purpose of the work and how their contributions will be used. For this, transparency of the process is as important as brevity.

With a purpose in mind, you may want to refine your message and ensure the language used is appropriate. Consider the specific groups you want to communicate to and how you may need to tailor the message for them, e.g. the differences between engaging student societies and staff networks. If you are looking for individuals self-identifying with a particular ethnic group, think how you can best tailor the message for them.

You may wish to avoid attracting only a self-selecting group of attendees. If so, consider whether promoting 'blind' focus groups, where participants don't know the exact topic they are coming to discuss in advance, would be more appropriate.

Enablers

Here you'll want to consider what the enablers to the discussions are and how you can promote them.

ALLYSHIP: As these focus groups are aimed at gathering evidence, it's important that participants are assured these sessions are Black, Asian and minority ethnic-only spaces. White allies remain integral to these focus groups to support the Chair/s and overall success of the sessions, and any subsequent actions feeding into the wider ARC conversation.

HOLDING THE SPACE: The key enabler is the space you create, ensuring that participants feel safe in openly discussing sensitive topics. These discussions can often be emotionally-charged. Black, Asian and minority ethnic participants need to feel valued in their lived experiences and safe to share them.

SUPPORT: Beyond setting the tone and creating a safe space in the sessions, you need to ensure you first have the structural and procedural mechanisms in place in case of disruption or distress. Robust support and complaint procedures are a required first step in enabling discussion, as everyone needs to be assured they can have any issues they face addressed appropriately. Identify in advance a list of post-event resources on how attendees can support and look after themselves so that you may share them with participants in the session. It is important that they are supported during and after the sessions as they can be emotionally draining and distressing.

PREPARING EVERYONE: Before the session runs, encourage participants to get involved in the mind-set of the focus group. This can be achieved by communicating in advance what topics will be discussed and what they can expect. We recommend having participants complete a survey in advance to inform topic selection for the session, this helps focus discussions and maximise the effectiveness of the time used.

CLOSING THE DISCUSSION: End every session with a decompressing section, built into the timing for the focus group. This helps participants leave the space feeling good about the discussions and ensures they're effectively supported. You may wish to play music, have a casual chat or ask how they're feeling.

Barriers

BUY-IN: Before embarking on your ARC journey, identify any potential barriers to discussions and reflect on these throughout. First, you'll want to ensure you have institutional buy-in so the focus groups receive the resources and support they need, and ultimately can act on their findings.

POWER DYNAMICS: Power imbalances are another important consideration in designing the model for your focus groups, hence our recommendation for separate staff and student sessions. Students will benefit more from dedicated spaces, particularly in the first instances, where they won't fear judgement or discrimination from staff. In a similar vein, staff need to feel comfortable sharing without the same concerns regarding their colleagues, especially those in higher positions. Having senior managers and lecturers in the same space may create more barriers to discussion. Consider how you can create a level playing field between the attendees, as well as with the Chair, with regards to their institutional roles.

ASSUMPTIONS: Be cognisant of the negative impact assumptions and biases can have on discussions and spaces created. The Chair and attendees need to be self-aware in these spaces to challenge their thought processes while avoiding alienating anyone in the group.

LANGUAGE: Careful consideration must be given to the language used in the sessions, ensuring it is accessible and inclusive. If using specific terminology, make this clear at the start and be open to being challenged on its appropriateness.

INTERSECTIONALITY: Intersectionality of individuals can be a potential barrier to discussions. It is important to gather participant data in advance of the session so you can be prepared to navigate any impacts. Think of how male-dominated the space is, whether there are power imbalances, and how the backgrounds of individuals may interact with each other.

CONFLICT: Most importantly, be careful in ensuring attendees do not become disruptive, intentionally or unintentionally. These can be very difficult conversations to have, so be prepared to address and resolve any disruptions that may occur. You are not looking for consensus but authentic feedback and all contributions need to be handled with compassion and respect.

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Further Reading

Black, Asian and minority ethnic Students' Views on Studying at the OU <https://youtu.be/iffPsRQ2fvQQ>

Patrice Belton, Vice President of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, OU Student Association, presented the findings of three focus group discussions which she ran with students who are members of the OU Student Association Black Asian and Minority Ethnic group.



AdvanceHE



Offensive questions, stereotypes and ‘jokes’ have a lasting impact on individuals, affecting their mental health, career progression and overall welfare at college or university.

It's time to stop sweeping these microaggressions under the rug.
Call racism out for what it is and challenge unacceptable behaviour.

It's time to take a stand.

#CallItRacism

Call it racism | Challenge racist behaviour | Change racist structures