

The Voice Referendum

Statement on University Expectations for Respectful and Informed Debate

1. Purpose

This Statement informs expectations for how members of the University community will engage in public debate on the Voice referendum. It articulates:

- A rationale for both the significance of the debate and the role of universities in supporting robust and respectful discussion of controversial issues
- High level principles for engaging in respectful evidence based and academically rigorous debate both within and beyond the classroom
- Links to relevant policies, guidelines and documents
- Advice on where and how to seek assistance in the event that staff have concerns about the public debate, feel unsafe or experience racism.

2. Rationale

In 2023, the Australian people will vote in a yes/no referendum on enshrining in The Constitution of Australia an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to parliament and government.

The Voice will be a representative advisory body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, providing a permanent means to advise the Australian Parliament and Government on the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on matters that affect them.

This is one of the most important national conversations Australians will engage with. Progress in society often depends on robust debate, and universities have a responsibility to encourage discussion of controversial issues facing society. The University is committed to supporting robust discussion and the voices of Indigenous people.

While the University should have a high tolerance for what might be seen as controversial, public statements which disparage or harm vulnerable groups are not acceptable, even if they are within the law. Importantly, supporting the freedom to express controversial opinions and ideas without retribution must be balanced with our commitment to being a safe, inclusive, equitable and respectful community. The Voice to parliament debate has been linked to increased psychological distress among Aboriginal and Torres Straits Island peoples highlighting the importance of the University taking an active role in supporting Indigenous staff, students and community members.

3. Guidelines

The University encourages all staff and students to take the time to understand the issues at play and their significance for Indigenous people. The following information provides guidance on how staff can foster robust debate while protecting individuals or groups from being targeted in harmful ways.

Staff are encouraged to keep the following high-level principles in mind when engaging in respectful discussion and debate on the Voice referendum:

- Freedom of inquiry and the free expression of ideas are fundamental to the mission of the university.
- In addition to supporting the free expression of ideas, we are committed to fostering an inclusive campus culture in which all community members feel they belong.
- Discussion and debate become unacceptable if the purpose or effect is to attack vulnerable individuals or groups such that it impedes their ability to participate fully in University life.
- The University is strongly committed to protecting those who are negatively affected by speech (including in news commentary, social media or email communications).

The existing [*Guidelines for the Appropriate Exercise of Freedom of Speech*](#) should be referenced including Section 5, 6 and 7.

The following university policies and documents provide relevant information on the university's expectations in relation to respectful debate and advice on taking action when staff or student behaviour falls below expectations.

4. Relevant university documents

Policies

Academic Freedom of Expression Policy (MPF1224)
<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1224/>

Appropriate Workplace Behaviour Policy (MPF1328)
<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1328/>

Freedom of Speech Policy (MPF1342)
<https://policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1342/>

Other

[Anti-racism Commitment](#)

5. Support available at the University

The University recognises that the Voice referendum may raise issues for staff. As detailed in relevant policies, if discussions around the Voice referendum raise issues, or if staff experience or witness racism, they should seek assistance from either their manager or a member of the Human Resources team in the first instance.

In addition, there are number of other support services available that offer a range of confidential support and advice. These include:

- [Safer Community Program : University of Melbourne \(unimelb.edu.au\)](#)
- [Counselling & Psychological Services](#)
 - Employee Assistance Program (incl specialist counselling and support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people provided by a team of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clinicians)
- [Aboriginal Counselling](#)
- [Victorian Aboriginal Health Service](#)