

Addressing racism through education: examples from Asian and Asian Australian communities



Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges all First Nations peoples across the continent and their continuing connection to land, waters, culture, and communities. We recognise the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which these resources are compiled, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise the long history and ongoing leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in anti-racism and anti-colonialism advocacy on this continent.

The Commission heard from communities, practitioners, and researchers about the critical need for shared and deeper understanding of systemic racism in implementing effective anti-racism action. Communities called for the incorporation of anti-racism education and diverse histories, knowledge, and culture into curricula within educational institutions. This should include truth-telling about Australia's settler colonial and migration histories, as well the ongoing impacts of discriminatory policies. To support holistic anti-racism education, these curricula changes will need to be complemented by anti-racism training and support networks for students, teachers, and employees.

Beyond embedding anti-racism in educational institutions, First Nations and other negatively racialised communities have long been working on various anti-racism education initiatives, both within and across communities. This resource spotlights some examples of educational initiatives led by Asian and Asian Australian community members to combat anti-Indigenous racism as an aspect of ongoing settler colonialism that permeates Australian culture and structures today. These efforts focus on building intergenerational solidarity and centring First Nations voices, and highlight the impacts and potential of educational initiatives in combatting racism.



Intergenerational learning and building solidarity towards anti-racism

This resource contains descriptions of experiences of racism that could be distressing and traumatic for some people, particularly people with lived experience of racism. If needed, you may want to seek support from formal support services [here](#). Please note that we have occasionally reproduced language from research sources that describe people in derogatory and offensive ways that are recognised as unacceptable today. We included such terms to demonstrate and dissect the language and thinking of the time, and we apologise for any offence or distress that reading such language might cause.

This resource was developed based on the commissioned advisory work of the Griffith University research team consisting of Dr Ubayasiri, Dr Willing, Dr Teo, Dr Anacin, and Ms Chew.¹ Designs by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People (2024). Layout by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People and Miranda Douglas.

Anti-Asian racism in Australia emerged from settler colonial attempts to assert white control over Aboriginal lands, including through immigration restrictions like the White Australia Policy. Anti-Asian racism therefore cannot be tackled in isolation from other forms of racism, including the anti-Indigenous racism uniquely experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as they are all rooted in the ongoing settler colonisation of the continent.

Some members of Asian and Asian Australian communities reflected on this historical context and suggested that, while negatively racialised in Australia, they themselves are not inherently immune from perpetuating anti-Indigenous racism, anti-African racism, and other forms of racism. People can still enable systemic racism when they echo racist beliefs. For instance, people

who experience racism can still enable racism by reinforcing skin colour-based discrimination, failing to recognise migrant settlers' complicity in settler colonialism or challenge the racist logic behind model minority myths, and participating in harmful discourses that blame First Nations and other negatively racialised communities for the racist treatment they receive.ⁱⁱ

In an effort to strengthen community education and build solidarity, Dr Eugenia Flynn, a Larrakia, Tiwi, Chinese Malaysian, and Muslim researcher and community organiser, shares insights from her personal experiences about how different forms of racism are interconnected and have shared roots in settler colonialism. Dr Flynn highlights the importance of building solidarity across different communities in the collective fight against racism:

*'As a Chinese Malaysian, Aboriginal, and Muslim woman, I experienced racism across multiple fronts, but always felt especially impacted by the specific racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that ensures our ongoing dispossession. My entire life has been shaped by anti-Black racism, used by white Australia to justify the ongoing theft of land. I have come to know that the other side to this racist coin is racism against non-white 'foreigners', such as Asians and Muslims, who are a threat to white Australia's claims to land.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

Acknowledging knowledge gaps about Australia's settler colonial history and present-day issues, as well as First Nations people's ongoing anti-colonial efforts, some members of Asian and Asian Australian communities led education and advocacy efforts to build solidarity and support within their communities for Indigenous self-determination.

Some recent examples include various campaigns in support of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in 2023, such as the South Asians for Voice campaign. This community-led campaign aimed to show support for the Voice through the sharing of South Asian community members' perspectives on the reasons and importance for voting Yes.^{iv} Another similar campaign was also organised by prominent Chinese Australians, who publicly advocated for the Yes vote. While there are diverse views among Indigenous leaders and communities on the Voice to Parliament proposal, these community efforts are nonetheless clear examples of Asian and Asian Australian community members striving to educate themselves about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ongoing resistance against settler colonialism and pathbreaking work to achieve self-determination.

The leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in anti-racism and anti-colonial advocacy has inspired many Asian and Asian Australian community members to incorporate these insights into their own anti-racism advocacy. Key to these initiatives and actions are also desires to build solidarity and understanding through intergenerational learning and storytelling.

These efforts recognise older generations of Asian Australians as witnesses, experts, and mentors, who are important sources for understanding the lived experiences of anti-Asian racism. This is in terms of the impacts and trauma of migration history and racist policies, the distinct racism experienced by older and aging Asian Australians, and their strength in the ongoing resistance against racism.

At the same time, younger Asian Australians also shared reflections on their positions as migrant settlers and on their structural complicity in enabling or benefitting from racism against First Nations people, as well as other communities like Pasifika or African and African Australian communities. These efforts include storytelling work like the *Letters for Black Lives* initiative. This global letter-writing initiative provides multilingual resources to support conversations about the issues of police brutality and systemic racism. Young Asian Australians who participated in the initiative shared stories and perspectives about why the fight against anti-Indigenous racism, and racism against African, Pasifika, and other communities, is of personal importance to them with their families, friends, and communities in an intimate way.^v These intergenerational educational efforts help to strengthen not only racial literacy within communities, but also anti-racism solidarity across generations, communities, and issues, and should be supported as part of broader efforts to cultivate shared understandings of racism in Australia.

Pathways forward – committing to a National Anti-Racism Framework

Communities called for greater support and resourcing for community-led anti-racism education initiatives, particularly efforts that centre community voices, encourage intergenerational learning across different intersections of identities, and enable cross-community interactions across issues. These initiatives will enhance knowledge about Australia's settler colonial history and present, as well as the unique migration experiences of different communities.

A more intersectional and systemic understanding of racism will allow communities to recognise how different systems, such as immigration, health, and justice systems, affect communities and individuals in varied ways, and work towards actionable and systems change. This shift away from generalising and monolithic views of communities' lived experiences will help build solidarity towards anti-racism and anti-colonialism; while services like health, resettlement, and other support services can better respond to communities' needs.

More broadly, communities highlighted the urgent need for anti-racism education to include truth-telling about Australia's settler colonial and migration histories, and the ongoing impacts of discriminatory policies. This would be critical for combatting the settler colonial and white supremacist narratives that lie at the heart of racism. Beyond the work needed in educational institutions and support for community-led initiatives, communities also advocated for efforts to build more holistic understanding about racism through the arts, museums and archives, academic research, non-traditional research, and public campaigns.

Read more about what's next for the National Anti-Racism Framework [here](#).

References

- ⁱ For the purpose of this project, the scope of 'Asia' discussed is limited to the regions of East, Southeast, and South Asia, and did not substantively cover other regions of Asia that are conventionally studied in fields including Middle Eastern Studies and Central Asian Studies.
- ⁱⁱ Bridget Harilaou, 'Why Asian Australians should call out racism beyond their own culture', *SBS Voices* (online, 27 September 2018) <<https://www.sbs.com.au/voices/article/why-asian-australians-should-call-out-racism-beyond-their-own-culture/fkpgmj4pv>>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Eugenia Flynn, 'Building Aboriginal-Asian Solidarity', *Peril Magazine* (online, 15 December 2020) <<https://peril.com.au/topics/activism/building-aboriginal-asian-solidarity/>>.
- ^{iv} South Asians for Voice, 'South Asians for Voice - Official Campaign Video' (YouTube, 4 September 2023) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJKRFOKGVqM>>.
- ^v Melinda Boutkasaka, 'George Floyd's death is inspiring young Asian Australians to look at racism in their community', *SBS News* (online, 7 July 2021) <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/dateline/article/george-floyds-death-is-inspiring-young-asian-australians-to-look-at-racism-in-their-community/y3jhx0880>>.