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Submission to support the development of a National Anti-Racism Framework

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We, the authors of this submission, acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we live and work, – the Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung, and Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respect to their Elders, past and present and their leaders now and in the future. We recognise their continuing spiritual and cultural connection to land, sea and community.

Introduction and overview

We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the AHRC and to contribute to its endeavour to develop a National Anti-Racism Framework – “a long-term, central reference point to guide actions on anti-racism by government, NGOs, business, educators, health professionals, police, other justice authorities, civil society, and the community.”

We make this submission as a group of researchers at Victoria University who have been involved in several collaborative initiatives and projects that address specific facets of racism, including anti-racism at the workplace and developing local anti-racism support service.

In summary, this submission proposes that the Anti-Racism Framework needs to address racism in all its complexity, adopting a broad definition of the scope of racism. That should cover biased attitudes (prejudice), behaviour and institutional and systemic forms of racism, as well as the interplay between these manifestations. It also needs to allow for addressing the intersectional nature of racism.

Anti-racism needs to centre the perspectives of those who experience racism without placing the responsibility to combat racism on them. Anti-racism must be a whole-of-society commitment and requires holistic approaches across all parts of society. In our submission we focus, in particular, on place-based anti-racism work in a local context that we have been proud to support, where we see great potential for effective and targeted anti-racism measures with tangible outcomes for communities. We propose that the Anti-Racism Framework give priority to

place-based anti-racism as a central element.

To position our submission, we acknowledge that we do not have personal lived experiences of racism. **We also recognize that anti-racism needs to centre the voices of those who experience racism. This must not place responsibility to respond solely with those who experience it. Instead, anti-racism responses need to include those who perpetrate racism and those who benefit from the institutions and systems which maintain racism, inequality and injustice.** In this sense, a whole-of-society response is necessary to holistically respond to racism.

Our names are Mario Peucker, Holly Claridge and Tom Clark. We are all affiliated with Victoria University’s Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities (ISILC).

Victoria University (VU) prides itself on being one of the most diverse universities in Australia, with staff and students representing over 90 different cultures and speaking more than 200 different languages. VU is also committed, through its teaching, research and engagement, to fostering a climate of inclusion on campus and in the community and to reducing and tackling exclusion and racism in all its forms. For example, VU supports the *Racism. It Stops with Me* campaign and is an ambassador in the anti-racism initiative *All One Together*, coordinated by the Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria (ECCV).

The Moondani Balluk Centre plays a particular central role in VU’s commitment to combating exclusion and systemic racism that affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Given our non-Aboriginal

background and lack of formal affiliation, we do not want to speak on behalf of Moondani Balluk in this submission, but sincerely hope that our contribution does not distract from the racial injustices that have affected First Nations people since the invasion of their lands.

In a 2020 public statement against systemic racism, VU declared:

“...VU is proud of its multicultural makeup as well as its cultural diversity engagement through our academic programs, research, partnerships with community and industry and our multicultural workplace. We take up our collective commitment to being accountable, to empower rather than to marginalise. Together with our community we work to ensure that human dignity and human rights are upheld, educational and vocational opportunities and participation are equal for all...”

VU’s commitment to inclusion and anti-racism has been institutionally embedded across the university, shaped its teaching and a broad range of different research and community engagement activities. This includes the initiatives we have recently delivered in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, multicultural and multifaith communities, local councils, community organisations and service providers. Together, we have aimed to improve the reporting and support options for local communities, so that they are more equitable, accessible and culturally responsive.

In this submission we would particularly like to focus on place-based approaches to anti-racism. In doing so, we hope we can address a crucial and, we believe, often overlooked

facet of anti-racism that can have tangible outcomes for local communities.

What principles should guide the Framework?

We propose that the Anti-Racism Framework should address racism in all its complexity, which requires a holistic, multifaceted strategy.

First, racism needs to be **conceptualised broadly** to include what Barker (1981) once called the ‘New Racism’ and what we today refer to as *cultural forms of racism*. This includes, among other phenomena, antisemitism and Islamophobia, which is a form of anti-Muslim racism (Islamic Council of Victoria, 2020). Moreover, the Framework should define racism in a way that allows for addressing the **intersectional nature of racism** and how different forms of exclusion and marginalisation interact.

This is related to another important aspect in the conceptualisation of racism: Understanding the underlying principles that various manifestations of racism have in common, whilst acknowledging the differences between ‘racisms’. The most obvious example to illustrate this is that racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is of a different nature than racism against Australia’s multicultural and multifaith communities. Acknowledging these differences is important and so is a commitment not to fall into the trap of creating a hierarchy of ‘racisms’ (e.g. one racism is worse than another). Instead, we propose there is value in understanding both the specifics and similarities, including their underlying mechanisms and patterns of historical, systematic exclusion, injustices and power.

Second, drawing on both academic work and experiences of community engagement, we would like to highlight – as many others have done in the past – the **multifaceted nature of racism and acknowledge the complex interplay between these different layers or dimensions**. At its most basic level, this is reflected by the expression, originating from US anti-racism movements in the 1970s, that racism is “prejudice plus institutional power.” It is widely acknowledged that racism can manifest as

- prejudiced and biased attitudes;
- behaviour, including racial micro-aggressions, discrimination, insults, threats, assaults or even murder; and
- institutional and systemic forms, including legislation or administrative procedures.

Hence, racism is not always rooted in individual prejudice nor does it always manifest in personal behaviour, but it also has direct exclusionary and continuously marginalising effects on people through institutional policies and practices.

We argue that, despite the general recognition of these three fundamental dimensions of racism (attitudes, behaviours and systems or institutions), **effective anti-racism is sometimes hampered by an underappreciation of their complex interconnectedness**.

We posit that this has often led to the development of anti-racism measures that focus on attitude change without taking into account systemic and institutional factors. Moreover, many of these measures perceive racism not only in a one-dimensional way

but also often as something that can be addressed by simply providing ‘accurate’ information, highlighting implicit biases or an opportunity to meet “the other.” Empirical research on anti-racism training (including implicit or unconscious bias trainings) generally indicates that interventions focused on imparting knowledge tend to be ineffective in reducing racist attitudes.

Social norms can influence whether and how individuals express and act out racial prejudice. This means symbolic anti-racism messaging can and should be part of a larger anti-racism framework, but we argue that this also needs to be embedded in a much broader anti-racism strategy that addresses systemic racism.

What outcomes and strategies are necessary for the Framework to create change?

Reflecting the multilayered and interconnected nature of racism, we propose that any anti-racism strategy must be **multi-faceted, holistic and implemented across a range of social areas and institutions**. This ranges from education to employment, from media to police, across all levels of government and civil society, including sporting organisations. In all these realms, anti-racism needs to address attitudinal, behavioural and systemic-institutional forms of racism and the interplay between these levels and manifestations.

While we acknowledge and emphasise such a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach to anti-racism, our **submission focusses primarily on reducing racism**

within its local contexts, thus highlighting the role of local government, service providers and community groups. We identify five areas of local anti-racism work that should be taken into account in the Framework.

(1) Knowledge-based approaches to increase understanding and reduce prejudice

Although racism is not merely (or possibly not even primarily) based on a lack of information or misinformation about particular groups (affected by racism), providing opportunities to learn about other cultures and faiths can form a preventative part of an anti-racism strategy. That includes learning first-hand about how each culture and faith community may perceive and experience racism.

There is a plethora of such initiatives in schools, civil society, local government and elsewhere, and some have had positive effects on intergroup relations and led to a reduction in prejudicial attitudes through cognitive (knowledge-based) intervention programs.

Funding and facilitating such educational programs, especially those run by community groups, should be part of any anti-racism strategy. However, the Framework should not rely solely, or not even primarily, on such programs for two reasons: first, they tend to reach mainly those who need them the least (self-selectiveness); and second, their focus on conveying “correct information” is generally insufficient to address deeper attitudinal or even structural manifestations of racism.

(2) Intercultural approaches: facilitating positive contact opportunity

Drawing on the empirically well-established notion that positive intergroup contact can (under certain conditions) have prejudice-reducing and preventive effects, anti-racism should also include measures that enhance opportunities for intergroup contact in a positive, cooperative environment. This may include neighbourhood and community initiatives (e.g. community gardens) or festivals, but also more institutionalised settings such as schools and workplaces.

Moreover, urban planning and infrastructure considerations play an important role in facilitating and encouraging cross-community interactions. Such actions are important and valuable, however they are not sufficient in themselves. Multifaceted measures and approaches aimed at enhancing intergroup contacts are important elements of a holistic anti-racism framework, but they do not directly address systemic-institutionalised dimensions of racism.

(3) Systemic-institutionalised dimensions

Tackling systemic racism is a particularly pivotal but also complex element of any anti-racism strategy. It requires an acknowledgment and understanding of how racism has been embedded in structures and institutions, and how these structures and institutions perpetuate racial injustices and inequality.

Dismantling racist structures is a long-term process and needs to be based on a variety of interventions and actions. One important element of this process in the local context

(but not only there) is to increase the representation of those affected by racism across all levels of local government and other organisations, in particular in decision-making positions. It is an element that requires constant effort to achieve and maintain meaningful advances.

Another important element within any defined locality or organization is to conduct a systematic audit of internal processes such as recruitment, communication and engagement strategies or grant programs, to identify potential structural barriers that may contribute to maintaining and reinforcing the exclusion and marginalization of certain groups. This audit, conducted with extensive community input, should also identify alternative and more inclusive processes, ensuring transparency and accountability of decision-makers.

(4) Managing and transforming conflicts

Community grievances and concerns around societal issues can be racialised and then result in racist scapegoating of particular communities. This is often fuelled and exacerbated by media reporting or public and political discourses.

An anti-racism framework also needs to find ways to counter such developments. The local context offers opportunities to intervene in arising conflicts and community tensions through conflict mediation and de-escalation. This also includes finding ways to critically engage with those who express racism without endorsing their racist sentiments or even enabling their amplification.

This is a challenging task. The Anti-Racism Framework should consider adopting measures to enhance the capacity of youth and social workers to engage with people who hold racist views. They could hold space for “difficult conversations,” with the aim of better understanding underlying sentiments and grievances, and to reduce their racist attitudes and/or behaviour – without legitimizing racism.

There may be a backlash against these approaches, but much research shows that a failure to engage with such individuals may actually make them more susceptible to overtly aggressive and harmful expressions of racism, including right-wing extremist actions, networks and ideologies.

(5) Empowerment and community-led support services

While we emphasise that the responsibility for combating racism does not sit with those affected by racism, a future anti-racism strategy should be centered on the voices of those with lived experience and guided by their community expertise.

One area where they can play a very important role is in shaping the provision of support for those who have experienced racism. We propose the Anti-Racism Framework includes measures that contribute to building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and multifaith communities, to provide culturally responsive, trusted and local support services and reporting pathways for those experiencing racism. Such measures should be implemented and sustained (through funding and operational support) as community empowerment initiatives and in close collaboration with these communities.

The importance of such place-based, community-led responses to racism and support services for those who have experienced racism has been underscored by several local projects Victoria University has initiated in Melbourne's west (Wyndham; final project report available [here](#)), north (Whittlesea, currently under way) and southeast (Casey and Greater Dandenong, also currently under way). These initiatives aim not only to encourage people to report racism but also to improve community-based support services and reporting opportunities as a crucial way to complement existing reporting pathways through police and human rights commissions. These Victoria University partnership initiatives take a two-fold approach (for more details, see [Empowerment through community-led responses to racism: A practical guide for local governments](#)~~the practical guide~~):

- (1) working closely with local community organisations and service providers to build their capacity to provide support responsive to the specific needs of local communities; and
- (2) working with local communities to identify their specific needs and expectations towards support services and reporting pathways for those who experience racism.

Developing local community-led support and reporting services tailored to the needs of local communities can encourage communities to speak out against racism, seek support and report their experiences. An increase in community reporting can generate more locally-specific data on racist incidents. This evidence is important for identifying local areas of concern and

hotspots, and for developing more responsive and specific prevention and intervention measures.

We would like to share the statement from a local resident from the South Sudanese community who participated in our Wyndham project:

"It has given us agency, the power has been put into our hands – and we feel like we as a community group are more in charge now. In the past we did not know where to go when we experienced racism, maybe we were told to call a certain phone number, but through this project we have been empowered to play an active role as a community group. We no longer simply hope that others do something about racism, and it has encouraged our community members to come to us. I can see that this is changing things for us in Wyndham."

Another person from the local Muslim community in Wyndham, who was also actively involved in the project, highlighted the importance of place-based approaches to anti-racism:

"In the past I thought nothing can really be done about racism because it's a bigger problem. I had never really looked at racism through a local lens before, but now, after this project, I think actually there is a good chance to make a real impact on racism on the local level. There are better levers on the local level. And everyone can have an impact."

We, the authors of this submission, are happy to discuss aspects of the submission and to provide further material.

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