

# Overview

Community of Inquiry (CofI) is an [Arts & Humanities Research Council](#)-funded project which seeks to make difficult conversations on complex topics feasible and productive by providing a systematic approach that gives agency and voice to students and staff. Through its practical model, the project seeks to foster a greater understanding of managing freedom of expression and mutual understanding across the university sector and in society.



The Community of Inquiry approach was first developed by pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce. It is a systematic approach to an honest discussion in which every move is made explicit. This serves to also make explicit the implicit assumptions behind conversations, which helps to uncover structural and personal biases. Having understood the framework, participants begin by establishing for themselves a set of ground rules and procedural values through which they confront and overcome potential pitfalls ([Scott-Baumann and Perfect 2021](#)). This interactive, collaborative approach often causes exasperation and necessitates compromise, leading to deal-making that promotes mutual understanding and recognition. It thus seeks to dismantle the binary debates we often fall into. Students will also generate their injunctive norms for desirable behaviour in discussions, offline and online. Fundamentally, by developing communal meaning-making that facilitates different viewpoints and accepts a range of beliefs and an appreciation of inclusivity, it initiates participants in deliberative democracy.

The Community of Inquiry approach can be adapted for academic debate in class, students' union discussions about freedom of speech policies, or in student societies about difficult topics. It can also be adapted to any civic situation where there is strong contestation of views.

The Community of Inquiry project is based at SOAS and is led by [Professor Alison Scott-Baumann](#) together with [Professor Adam Sutcliffe](#) (King's College), Professor Tarek Al-Baghal, Dr Mukta Das, Dr Yenn Lee, Dr Hina Shahid, Peter Baran, Hasan Pandor and Julia Stolyar.

## Background

This project builds upon the [Re/presenting Islam on Campus](#) project (2015-2018) by providing concrete solutions to its findings of democratic deficits on UK campuses. Three critical problems identified were:

1. Widespread ignorance about dependence upon the media for information about Islam; the effects of counter-terror programmes; and minority self-censorship on campus;
2. Lack of opportunities and skills for conducting difficult conversations safely and productively; and
3. Broad-spectrum racism against Black and Jewish students and staff.

In 2019, Universities UK and the National Union of Students also jointly published a report, 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #ClosingtheGap', which posited

that: 'Universities and students need to create more opportunities to talk directly about race, racism and the attainment gap and identify what students think is causing it'. This recommendation was made upon finding that, on campus, minority individuals and groups specifically are often judged negatively due to their appearance and are denied a voice, which creates democratic deficits for them. [Current findings](#) of National Health Service staff convey a similar story of those from minority backgrounds not being heard or even being chastised for raising concerns.



## Aims and Objectives

We will explore and refresh our findings from the Re/presenting Islam on Campus project concerning this current situation. We will work with relevant stakeholders to provide concrete solutions to the democratic deficit described above. Supported by SOAS's unique expertise and established connections with minority communities in the higher education and health sectors, we aim to:

1. utilise our research findings and lessons learnt from the Re/presenting Islam on Campus project widely, for the benefit of Muslim and other minority groups in higher education;
2. foster a campus culture where university students and staff, from both majority and minority backgrounds, are actively encouraged to engage in critical dialogues and anti-discriminatory practices; and
3. evaluate the impact of the project findings and follow-on activities and expand impact-generating activities into digital spaces to maximise the value of the original research.

These aims will be achieved through the following objectives; correspondingly, we will:

1. create and deliver a training programme using the 'Community of Inquiry' method to ensure that our findings have an impact by being discussed openly and honestly;
2. pilot this programme in collaboration with students' unions and NHS experts to facilitate trust, openness, civility and group solutions; and
3. conduct pre-and post-tests, monitor relevant online communications and facilitate dissemination of the training programme.

The core team will be trained in Community of Inquiry group techniques to achieve this. It will use their expertise in race, Jewish issues, Islam and the effects of social media to facilitate CofI workshops and research. At SOAS, we will also train university students in running CofI sessions on topics where free speech and open dialogue have become problematic. We will provide taster sessions across UK universities to tackle the discrimination, racism, and ignorance that lead those who feel targeted to self-censor (this applies to all minority groups). We will also run sessions at medical schools where support is required in facilitating Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives.

We invite students, student unions, academics and EDI facilitators to join the project and become CofI-trained so that you can facilitate CofI workshops and lead the way in ameliorating discrimination and fostering harmony in your respective spaces.