

# What can we do to resolve historic tension and negative relations?

Historic tension and negative relations with faith and belief societies may hinder future opportunities within your students' union. By taking steps to resolve these issues both parties can rebuilt trust and work towards a more inclusive union.

## Dialogue not debate

It is important to begin addressing these issues through dialogue not debate. Progress can be made by actively listening to the concerns of both parties in an open manner. Though it may take time, resolving these issues can lead to wider engagement and positive relations with the students' union.

For further information on managing conflict see [here](#).

## Creating a safe space

Setting ground rules together is an important part of creating a safe space. This way the group collectively decides what they wish to see happen in the space, and what they deem is acceptable behaviour.

## Sample ground rules

- Use 'I' statements
- Respect the right of others to disagree with you.
- Correct misunderstandings and misrepresentations of your own and other people's faith or belief when you come across them.
- Recognise that all of us at times fall short of the ideals of our own faith/belief tradition and we should not compare our own ideals with other people's practices.
- Listening as well as speaking is necessary for a genuine conversation.

- Make sure that when it's your time to listen you listen and aren't just waiting to respond.
- Understand that no derogatory comment will go unchallenged.

## The role of a facilitator

Dialogues can benefit from a facilitator who helps ensure that engagement is rewarding and successful for those taking part.

A facilitator has the authority to change the activity or topic of conversation without taking on the role of a strict authority figure. It is a role which requires a balanced and fair handling of situations; the facilitator cannot fully put aside their personal beliefs but must strive to consider the effects of what is said and done on all those present. He or she can ask questions or stimulate the activity or dialogue at particular points, but their role is predominantly listening to and observing the group, ensuring individuals are comfortable and adhering to the ground-rules.

Learning how to facilitate activities and dialogue is perhaps one of the most challenging parts of organising activities. Developing these skills takes time and practice, and cannot be achieved merely by reading this guidance. Remember NUS is available to provide further support and training as necessary, but the best way to learn is to practice.

## Dialogue Activities

The following dialogue activities can be used to engage various groups who have had a disagreement with each other. They offer an opportunity to discuss opinions in a safe manner.

### Silent discussion

This activity is great to use with large groups of students who have lots to say but might be weary of speaking their opinions aloud to strangers.

#### Set up:

Place flip chart paper on tables around the room with a different question or statement written on each one. Put lots of marker pens on the tables too.

#### Activity:

- Ask people to walk around the room and write their opinions down in silence.
- As more people start to write, participants may want to go back over sheets they have already written on to respond to comments.
- Give people enough time to respond and re-respond before ending the activity.
- Reflect on some of the points of discussion but don't ask anyone to justify what they have written.



Example of silent discussion taking place.

## Fishbowl dialogue

This activity is great to use with large or small groups of students who have lots of questions to ask one another. It can also be used as a tool to initiate conversations and dialogue about a particular issue or topic.

#### Set up:

Depending on the number of people you have place three to five chairs facing each other as the fishbowl. The outer circle of chairs should be equal to the total number of people in the group. Therefore, if you have 10 students participating in the activity there needs to be 10 chairs in the outer circle. The number of chairs in the inner circle does not change. Before you start, ask everybody to write any question they want to ask on a piece of paper. Ask participants to fold the paper up and place all questions into a hat or bag which the facilitator has.

#### Activity:

To start everybody sits in the outer circle, the facilitator must explain the following rules of the activity, before you begin:

- Only those seated in the inner circle are allowed to speak. After the first question has been asked (by the facilitator), those who want to answer, respond to the question must move to a seat in the inner circle.
- Participants cannot speak when sitting in the outer circle.
- Those in the inner circle must speak in the order that they sat down, allowing everybody the opportunity to speak equally.
- When there are three people already sitting in the inner circle and someone in the outer circle wants to speak they must stand just to the side of the first person who sat down – so that they know someone is waiting to speak.
- If you are in the inner circle and see someone waiting to take your place, finish your point and move back into the outer circle (you are allowed to move back in at any point, by the same approach).