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Scotland's largest
education trade union

EIS Member briefing: **Addressing misinformation and disinformation in educational establishments**



Every learner has the right to learn, and every teacher and lecturer has the right to work, in an educational environment where they can be themselves, and flourish.



Introduction

Access to information and the ability to participate freely in public discourse are important foundations for democratic societies. This foundation is threatened by false information, which has the potential to add to polarisation and promote hate and violence, and, in turn, risks undermining trust and community cohesion.

Educational establishments should be safe and welcoming for all learners and their families as well as staff.

The aim of this guidance is to provide advice for members on navigating and addressing misinformation and disinformation, to promote social justice and equality.

The EIS will continue to advocate for high standards of education, with an inclusive curriculum reflecting the diverse backgrounds, identities and experiences of all members of our society, including our teachers, lecturers, fellow education professionals, learners and their families.



Understanding false information

A 2024 nationally representative study^[1] by the Alan Turing Institute found that 94% of adults in the UK reported witnessing misinformation on social media.

False information, such as propaganda, has historically been recognised as posing a threat to democracy, and public safety, but recent years have seen a significant rise in the spread of false information through advances in information technologies such as social media. The spread of false information and the influence of harmful narratives have been enabled within a context of widespread disillusionment with mainstream politics and rising levels of social insecurity and poverty.

False and potentially harmful information can go viral in a matter of hours. It is, therefore, essential in upholding democratic values that the public is resilient to disinformation.

False information can be harmful, whether it is intentionally shared, or not. It can contribute to prejudice and stereotyping of minority groups, and sow division, spreading fear and hate. In turn, this can affect the safety and wellbeing of those targeted.

- Misinformation is a term to describe any false information shared unintentionally, such as errors, misleading captions, parody or satire.
- Disinformation is a term to describe any false information that is deliberately created and/or shared to mislead others.
- Malinformation is information that is true but taken out of context or exaggerated in order to mislead or manipulate others.

Key features of false information online and in media, may include the following definitions, taken from the Digital Discourse Initiative^[2]:

- Fabricated content: new content that is entirely untrue, created to deceive or cause harm.
- Sponsored content: advertising or PR disguised as editorial content.
- Propaganda: content used to manage the attitudes or values of others, intended to cause an emotional reaction.
- False context: factually accurate content combined with false contextual information.
- Satire or parody: false/untrue information that attempts to be humorous and is not intended to cause harm but has the potential to mislead.

It is essential in upholding democratic values that the public is resilient to disinformation.

¹ www.turing.ac.uk/news/publications/how-do-people-protect-themselves-against-online-misinformation

² www.digitaldiscourse.scot

- Errors: mistakes made in reporting.
- Manipulated content: genuine information or imagery that is manipulated in order to deceive others.
- Imposter content: impersonating genuine or official sources to appear authentic.
- False connection: headlines, visuals or captions that do not support the rest of the information or content.
- Misleading content: misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual.

Misinformation and disinformation can result in even well-intentioned individuals making decisions and taking actions that might cause harm or exacerbate existing inequalities. It is, therefore, important to be able to recognise and respond effectively to false information and stay rooted in professionalism, having due regard to relevant professional values.

You can learn more about how to identify false information in the free online Digital Discourse Initiative e-learning course^[3].

Making of the ‘other’

Some groups exploit a lack of knowledge and familiarity with minority groups, and media sensationalism, to spread disinformation which can have serious consequences. In terms of media and communication, these groups often utilise rhetorics of both threat and ridicule to justify hate against certain groups of people.

On the one hand, rhetoric might paint a group of people as ‘fearsome’ and on the other hand, as ‘less than’. The combination of these two ‘frames’ serve to create a culture of non-empathy and disengagement, as well as stoking up fear and uncertainty that creates further distance.

Groups who oppose the presence or involvement of minority groups in their communities, tend to frame their interventions as being motivated by a desire to protect vulnerable people, specifically, often women and children, from harm, which openly or inadvertently signals fear and mistrust towards minoritised people.

To reject the narrative of the ‘other’, communications and efforts should focus on building inclusion and unity, resisting division and engaging in positive examples and personal stories to close the ‘distance’ and create a broader and more inclusive ‘we’.

³ www.digitaldiscourse.scot



Disinformation and the ‘Far Right’

Who are the Far Right?

There are many terms used to describe far right, extreme right or radical right ideologies and these groupings are by no means monoliths. Importantly, the term is often used to describe other people – rather than being how people would describe themselves.

‘Far right’ is an umbrella term which broadly describes a set of core beliefs rooted in “chauvinistic nationalism (exceptionalism)”^[4] - involving an in-group and out-group - and a belief that the nation or in-group is under threat from the out-group and believing that radical action is required.

Far right ideologies pose a challenge to democracy, human rights, and community cohesion. Fascism is an extreme subcategory of ‘far right’ ideologies, categorised by authoritarianism and suppression of any opposition. Not all far right ideologies are fascist.

Right-wing populism utilises populist rhetoric and themes, such as representing or appealing to a singular group of ‘common people’ and reflects an anti-establishment attitude.

⁴ <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2024/08/29/call-them-what-they-are>

Hope Not Hate's 'State of the Hate' 2024 report, an analytical guide to the state of far right extremism in the UK, describes a rise in the popularity of radical right politics, noting that across both the radical and traditional far right, two main agenda items continue to dominate the attention. **Migration**, and **anti-LGBT** politics, most specifically relating to transgender people, are continuing to gain mainstream appeal through persistent, hostile media coverage, including on social media. Other groups, such as disabled people, are also frequently targets of biased or negative communications by the far right.

Responding to legitimate concerns

It is important to note that anyone can be influenced by disinformation as this is devised to be persuasive, and to appeal to strong emotions, stoking up fear and uncertainty. Being influenced by far right disinformation, for example, does not make someone right-wing or mean that they have ill-intentions. Colleagues who are concerned that they may be influenced by misinformation can assess the validity of the information by making further inquiry through reputable sources and support. Sources may include organisations signposted by the Scottish Government, and organisations that are led by individuals with lived experience.

Crucially, groups who spread misinformation and disinformation are effective because they provide an 'answer' to the very legitimate concerns of people, for example poverty, lack of secure housing etc. **It is important, therefore, to engage with misinformed individuals by taking their concerns seriously, and offer other, meaningful solutions and avenues for engagement to address these concerns. It is important to also approach these conversations without making assumptions or labelling people.**

Colleagues should always engage critically with any information and be guided by their professional standards and values. If you require support, it may be beneficial to discuss with colleagues, or for any employment related issues, approach your line manager in the first instance, or your trade union representative. Further links for resources are provided at the end of this document.

The role of educational establishments

The Equality Act (2010) prohibits discrimination and harassment on the basis of protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. The Public Sector Equality Duty also applies to educational establishments, and involves taking preventative action to reduce prejudice and increase understanding between different groups of people.

The Scottish Government is clear that inclusion is a central ethos of Scottish education, to help develop the four capacities: successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

In relation to staff, the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) sets out employers' duties to ensure a safe working environment, protecting workers' health and welfare. Every worker has a right to a safe workplace, and embedding inclusive policies can help ensure this.

Educational establishments can play a key role in advancing equality for all and should receive resourcing and support to do so, to safeguard and promote the health, safety and wellbeing of all learners and staff.

Responding to misinformation and disinformation

The EIS is aware that educational establishments may be receiving material in the form of online pressure, physical presence, communications such as flyers etc., containing false information related to minority groups, or suggesting that young people are at risk simply due to the presence of minoritised pupils, families or staff in the educational establishment. These types of information may explicitly or implicitly reinforce harmful narratives, for example in relation to migrants, women, disabled people or LGBT people, which can undermine their wellbeing and safety, and contribute to the spread of misinformation.

Educational establishments can play a key role in the wider struggle against misinformation and disinformation, by proactively affirming its commitment to equality for all, including those who are being specifically targeted by far right disinformation: migrants, transgender people, disabled people, women and girls, and others.



All educational establishments should ensure staff feel confident to deliver inclusive education, and supported with professional learning, as well as time to engage in collegiate dialogue and embed their learning in practice.



Teachers and lecturers may be concerned that misinformation may cause staff, learners, or parents to worry or complain to the school, college or university. **If you are concerned that someone in the community has received misinformation in relation to a minority group, please contact your local association secretary or branch secretary.**

If colleagues are concerned about a learner (who may be personally negatively impacted by such lobbying material) or by misinformation or disinformation from other sources, you should follow your establishment's processes to support their wellbeing, including conducting risk assessments, where appropriate and following child protection and safeguarding protocols where there is a risk of significant harm to the child.

Building a resilient foundation

Educational establishments working preventatively to build good critical thinking skills and political literacy, as well as an understanding of equality issues, will lay a positive foundation that builds resilience when responding to misinformation and disinformation. The Digital Discourse Initiative is a helpful starting point.

It may be helpful on a whole establishment level to consider ways to build resilience to false information, for example undertaking learning through the Digital Discourse Initiative or engaging further with the TIE for Inclusive Education Campaign.

Additionally, educational establishments should consider engaging with whole school approaches in relation to inclusivity, for example anti-racist education, the national approach to LGBT inclusive education, and Equally Safe at School.

All educational establishments should ensure staff feel confident to deliver inclusive education, and supported with professional learning, as well as time to engage in collegiate dialogue and embed their learning in practice.

Strategic communication for educational establishments

Effective strategic communication can help challenge the spread of misinformed narratives, at the same time as increasing understanding and support for minoritised people.

For example, strategic communications may aim to:

- Move those who are despondent, cynical, or unsure, giving them confidence to act
- Strengthen or show support for those already well informed
- Educate those who are misinformed in the hope that this will assist in changing views

These strategies will require different styles of communication, but the general principles below may be useful to consider when preparing strategic communications or statements that aim to tackle misinformation and disinformation. Strategic communications policies should where possible be informed by collegiate and learner engagement, and as part of a whole-establishment approach to help frame this appropriately.

Careful consideration should be given to what issues will be responded to and when, and communication should be professional, with the promotion of wellbeing and inclusion, at the centre.

Given the context of widespread misinformation in relation to minoritised groups, it is advisable not to enter into discussion about the matters that are not relevant for education, for example those which are related to health, or individual cases such as those reported in the media. Keep conversations local and relevant to your context.

Consideration should be given as to when to respond to misinformation, and when to address false information in different ways. There may be a risk in inadvertently reinforcing misinformation by entering into discussions using the same framing of the issue as those who are spreading misinformation. For example by:

- Repeating and reinforcing misinformed narratives in attempts to refute it, for example beginning statements with “no”, “don’t” and referring to misinformed claims
- Platforming and providing airtime to negative messaging by responding directly to it, boosting visibility of misinformation
- Only communicating about minoritised people (for example LGBT people, migrants, disabled people, people of colour or neurodivergent people) when addressing misinformation or disinformation

Instead, research into effective messaging and organising frameworks^[5] for equality, suggests that communications that speak affirmatively about our vision and values can engage those who are already engaged and mobilise those who are unsure.

⁵ <https://asocommunications.com/messaging-guides/>

A successful strategic communication may include statements that:

- Broaden the ‘we’ by appealing to shared values across our differences, for example emphasising that we all deserve to be free to live our lives safely.
- Asserting the strength and breadth of people coming together in support, linking to other struggles that have been overcome, for example describing other solidarity campaigns such as when people came together to support the miners’ strike, or when unions joined in the campaigns to address period poverty.
- Name the problem that is threatening our shared values, without repeating claims that may help cement false narratives, for example by calling out how undermining people’s rights to live in safety and freedom hurts us all, not just minoritised people.
- Link the problem as part of wider struggles, for example by noting how we are operating in a context of widespread poverty and inequality, and far right scapegoating.
- Provide a desirable and positive vision for the future – showing what is possible when we all live freely and in solidarity with one another!

Direct dialogue and counter speech

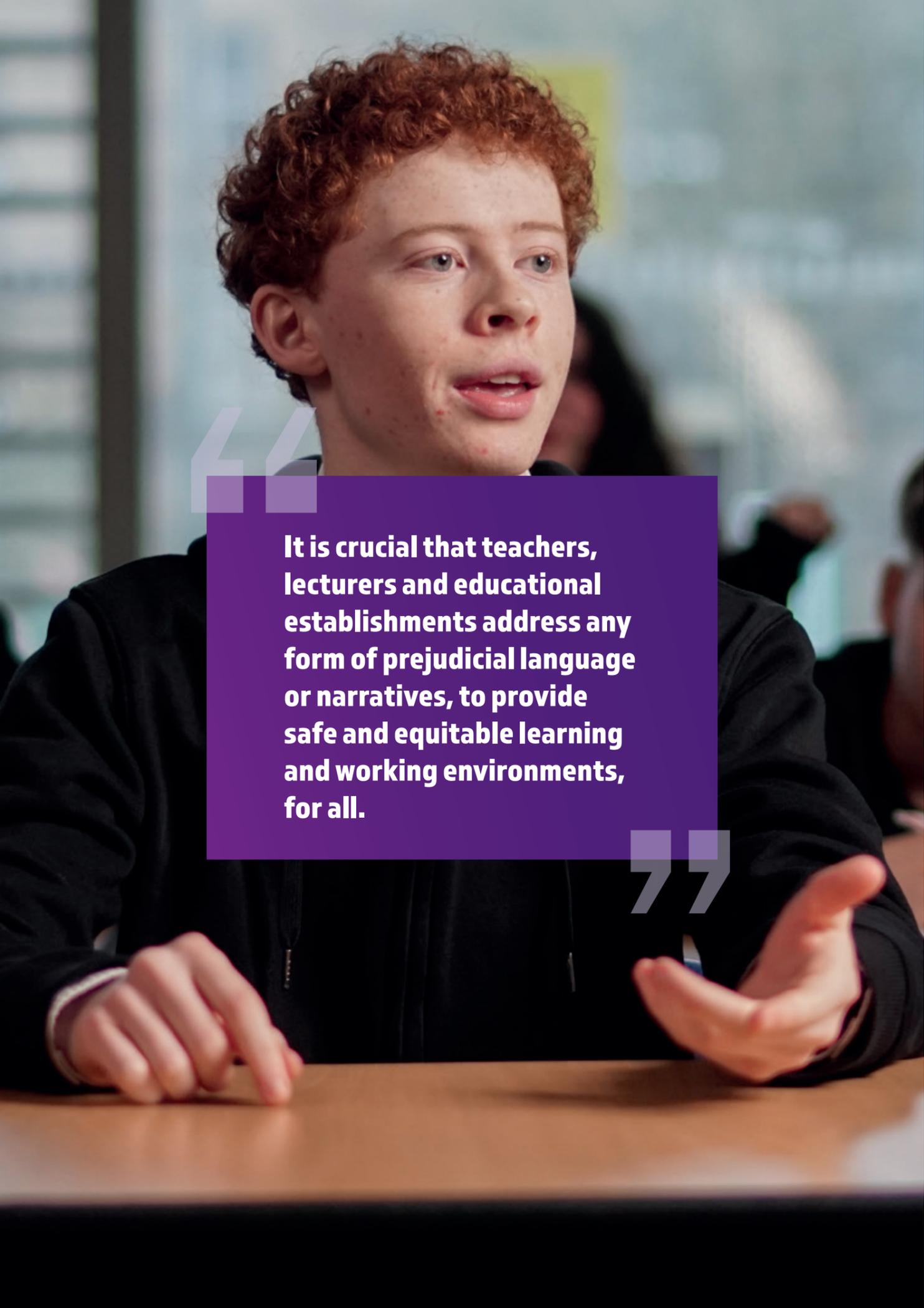
It is crucial that teachers, lecturers and educational establishments address any form of prejudicial language or narratives, to provide safe and equitable learning and working environments, for all. The establishment should support and empower teachers and lecturers to feel confident in addressing this.

The same principles as above, relating to strategic communications, may be applicable when seeking to enter into productive dialogue – it is especially important not to operate within the narrative of misinformation, which risks reinforcing it. For example, repeating false claims in efforts to myth bust, rather than emphasising meaningful learning and engagement with the accurate information itself.

Counter speech may also be a strategic tool in direct dialogue, guiding the individual towards critical reflection and considering the impact of the false or misinformed claims, on others.

The aim of counter speech is to foster empathy, and address prejudicial attitudes, by inviting open dialogue in a 1-1 setting.

When supporting any young person, the EIS would advocate a relational approach based on GIRFEC principles in which the needs of each young person as well as their individual circumstances are taken into consideration.



“
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The PEACE framework, developed by the Digital Discourse Initiative, may be an effective model for counter-speech:

1. Pause: provide space for a calm response and signal that this will be followed up
2. Empathy: leading with empathy for the people affected by prejudice, also empathy in avoiding labelling the person you are in dialogue with
3. Ask: encourage critical reflections through open-ended questions
4. Correct: provide facts and challenge misinformation
5. Encourage: promote positive behaviour and values

Consult the free Digital Discourse Initiative online course for further information about counter speech in addressing disinformation.

Proactively addressing the root issues

Misinformation thrives in contexts of deep societal inequality and poverty, where minoritised people are scapegoated for problems caused by political decisions. It is vital, therefore, that in the current context, the root causes of poverty and inequality are not seen as inevitable or attributed to minoritised groups but rather understood as economic and political choices.

As part of the wider trade union movement, the EIS is committed to organising against poverty, to calling out the economic and political choices that have created it and calling for those decisions to be undone and better decisions to be made in their place.

Without this approach, indignity and inequality will persist, opening the doors to the dangerous influence of the far right in our communities and in our political institutions. Tackling poverty is mission-critical to upholding human rights and democracy.

The EIS PACT professional learning offer explores the nature, causes and consequences of poverty, as well as the possible practical and pedagogical interventions to mitigate its impact on children and young people's school education. By adopting a whole-school approach, it empowers teachers, lecturers and educational establishments to fully appreciate the impact of poverty and take proactive steps to support learners and build community.

The EIS 'Standing Up to Poverty' Guidance also provides practical anti-poverty advice for educational establishments in mitigating the damage that poverty can do to young people, their families and communities.

It is important that all those working in the educational establishment are confident in the practice adopted. The EIS would, therefore, recommend that consideration is given to engaging with the PACT professional learning offer or anti-poverty guidance on a whole establishment basis, for example, during Inset Days.

To proactively reduce vulnerability to the influence of disinformation, educational establishments can work with the whole school community to support constructive discussions about community responses to problems such as poverty and inequality, which are often the concerns at the root, fuelled by disinformation.



Showing solidarity and support

The EIS will continue to advocate for high standards of education, with an inclusive curriculum reflecting the diverse backgrounds, identities and experiences of all members of our society, including our teachers, lecturers, fellow education professionals, learners and their families.

Sending messages of solidarity and signalling unequivocal support for migrants, Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) people, women, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people, disabled people and people living in poverty is especially important within the current context of widespread misinformation and disinformation around minoritised people's lives, and rights.

If you are experiencing discrimination, harassment or victimisation because of your identity, or being associated with a minoritised group or equality issue, seek the support of your EIS Trade Union Representative, Equality Representative, or Local Association Secretary / Branch Secretary.



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This guidance may be updated as required.

Further information about the EIS's work in this area can be found on www.eis.org.uk/equality/equality-home and in the EIS Anti Far Right Briefing www.eis.org.uk/campaigns/fightfarrightinfluence

This guidance includes content based on the digitaldiscourse.scot platform, where educators can access free CLPL on strategies to counter online hate.

The guidance is informed by research and guides by aso communications, and analysis by Hope not Hate.

<https://hopenothate.org.uk/state-of-hate-2024/>

<https://Asocommunications.com>
