



St George's
University of London

Becoming a Good Ally

A guide for staff and students
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Becoming a good Ally

At St George's we are committed to creating an inclusive environment for our staff and students. We hope to continually support members of the university community to challenge negative behaviours and practices; these could be in the form of discrimination, bullying or harassment. Over the course of our lives, we will encounter someone experiencing discrimination or harassment and sometimes we know exactly what to do and other times we do not. There is no problem in not knowing as long as we are willing to learn, and when lost, ask for directions.

Think of this guide as one of many starting points in your journey to becoming a better ally. This guide is meant to be starting point and does not get into specifics like racism, transphobia, gender discrimination, etc. That's because this guide can't and shouldn't be everything to you. At some point, you need to take responsibility and further your education. When you're done with the guide, please find ways to learn more.

Why do we need this guide?

We understand that individuals can be marginalised due to one or more aspect of their identity. That could be age, gender reassignment, marriage, pregnancy, disability, race/ethnicity, religion, or belief, sex, and sexual orientation; otherwise called protected characteristics.

To get a clearer understanding of our equality, diversity and inclusion mandate please refer to our EDI pages on the St George's University web site.

Differential outcomes exist for individuals with protected characteristics. This can be seen in the degree awarding gap, retention and progression, and unequal opportunities ultimately resulting in poor experiences for people with underrepresented identities. The St George's reporting tool serves as an avenue for students to report their grievances. Data from the reporting tool suggests that students with minority status are more likely to face bullying and harassment. Hence, the need for actions on Allyship to amplify students' voices and take individual accountability for actions, decisions geared to equality, diversity and inclusion and the outcomes.

It is important to recognise the significance of intersectionality and to be able to understand how to be an effective ally. Intersectionality refers to how one or more of one's characteristics can interact to form a unique experience for example race and gender, sexual orientation, and religion. See our online glossary at sgul.ac.uk/edi-glossary for more definitions.

In addition, growing regional and/or interregional conflicts have led to many people being displaced from places they once called home. This means we are more likely than ever to encounter people with diverse identities, and the burden to belong should not solely be placed on them. The burden of care increases on not just systems but individual to put themselves in a capacity to share privileges and amplify marginal voices.

Allyship indeed has become a buzzword. It rolls off the tongue easily but what is it?

What is Allyship?

Allyship is a deliberate and consistent act of using one's privilege to advocate for marginalised individuals and groups and challenge systems of inequalities with the hope of achieving better outcomes for those who otherwise lack them.

Allyship is a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalised individuals and/or groups of people. Don't take the responsibility of being an ally lightly. It might involve putting oneself in an uncomfortable position to make others comfortable.

What is not Allyship?

Allyship is not self-defined work and efforts must be recognised by those you are seeking to ally with. Outrage is not allyship, nor is shaming other people or groups you consider non-allies – the goal is to form meaningful partnership while speaking up. Be wary not to centre narratives around yourself.

Beginning every conversation by listing your privileges and biases is not allyship; rather what matters is how we can use those privileges to provide comfort to others who otherwise lack it. Expressing shock is not allyship, neither is a one-off social media post with no action. We should be wary of tokenism and performative allyship.

Being an Ally

To be an ally one should be open to the following Dos:

Listen – to be an effective ally we must listen to understand and not to judge.

Learn – take ownership of your learning; do not expect to be taught always. Familiarise yourself with Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) journals and publications and most importantly learn from those you are advocating for.

Take notice – focus your attention on the matter and be in the moment; write down outstanding information; be aware of your thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Be seen – be present during events, workshops, and activities. Your words should match your actions. Be careful not to centre the narratives around you.

Connect – be compassionate and show empathy. Show genuine interest in people's struggles. Ask question and support and join networks.

Get comfortable being uncomfortable – admit you are going to make mistakes and that you might find yourself in difficult situations. In this moment take a deep breath and count to 10. Learn how to apologise for mistakes – apologies are social contracts that hold you accountable. They tell others that you are taking responsibility, are open to the consequences of your actions, and plan to do better in the future.

Challenge – be ready to challenge discriminatory traditional norms. This could be done by openly speaking up against marginalisation, educating peers on progressive practices, and being an active participant in well-meaning movement.



Who can be an Ally?

Everyone has the capacity to be an ally because privilege is intersectional: white women can be effective allies to people of colour; men can be actionable allies to women; straight people can be allies to Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) people; those without disabilities can be allies to those with disabilities, and so on.

Being an ally doesn't necessarily mean you fully understand what it feels like to be oppressed. It means you're taking on the struggle for justice and equality as your own. As an ally, you want to understand how you can help dismantle inequalities alongside those that face unjust systems. Allies understand their role in collaboration with people whose lives are affected daily by systemic inequalities.

To get a better sense of students' perspective of allyship at St George's we spoke to a few Biomedical Science students.

Priya Chandrasekaran

"Allyship means people of different groups, for example, race, sexuality, and religion, coming together to support each other. Having friends with mixed identities gives me a better understanding of worlds different to mine."

Tewogbola Ajayi

"Allyship is supporting a community that you are not part of. For example, I am straight, but I have a close relationship with the LGBTQ+ community and I am always open to supporting their cause."

Priya and Tewogbola had positive things to say about witnessing allyship in our University community – mostly from other students. Often, they have witnessed someone speaking up against abuse suffered by another and that is, in a way, the norm we hope to establish.

What our data suggests

Data gathered across the institution encourages us to push further the conversation on allyship and advocacy. We are working strategically with staff, students, and the local community to close inequality gaps, promote freedom of expression and establish allyship as a predominant culture at St George's. We know the challenges of reaching a wider audience abounds. Therefore, we employ various media to communicate and involve the University community in ongoing actions. Below are some of the feedback from our previous workshops suggesting the increase in demands for allyship and advocacy work.

"We reached a pivotal point at the end of the session where we could have continued the conversation related to the library environment. The session was shorter than expected and ended leaving us wanting more!"

"Thanks for coming to speak to us earlier Attai, that was very worthwhile. As discussed, please can you let me know more about your longer course? I do think that a number of members of the team would like to learn more on this from you."

The duty is on us to take advantage of the readiness of the University community to learn and develop initiatives that will add value and draw us closer to the objective of having zero tolerance for discrimination.

How to join the conversation

Identify a cause you care about – do not see it as a Civil Rights movement.

Educate yourself about issues – Read about ongoing social issues, attend lectures and meetings and take time out to process and make sense of your personal learning and journey towards becoming an ally.

Ask the question – “How can I participate?”

Harness the power of technology and social media – Technology can be a useful tool towards dismantling systems of inequality. Take advantage of social media platforms – use them to learn and share.

Volunteer – Put yourself in a position to take up voluntary roles and activities geared towards inclusion.

How to manage a difficult conversation

We are likely to encounter difficult situations and conversations. This is a sign that we are doing something positive and should not be deterred; rather we should use the tips below to navigate such conversations. Please bear in mind the following:

A useful purpose and curiosity make a difficult conversation easier.

Get to know what is important to the person you are engaging with on subject matter – for example, some black women may be more interested in learning and development and not just the opportunity to sit at the table.

Understand other people’s perspectives – this does not mean you agree with them.

Think of ways you can manage yourself and expectations to be most effective – not all discussions will end in a desirable outcome. It is okay to rework the approach; this could be in the form of sharing best practice with others allowing them the opportunity to reflect on their stands.

Remember goals might be different – so focus on creating space for positive interactions.

To solve a problem – manage your reaction and speak in a manner that does not invalidate feelings but challenge positions.

Privilege

Privilege is closely linked to Allyship. Where there is privilege there is also oppression. The terms are like two sides of a coin. The coin model of critical allyships suggests that social structures produce both unearned advantage and disadvantage. This should guide our actions and encourage people with privilege to resist the unjust structures that ultimately produce social iniquities. What does it mean to have privilege? Privilege is defined as “unearned access to resources (social power) only readily available to some people as a result of their advantaged social group membership”.

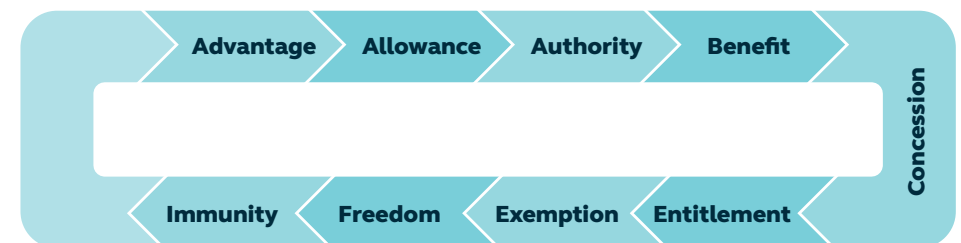
Determining who has privilege or disadvantage is complex because cultural, social, and historical changes affect which groups are privileged and which groups are not.

Some may pass as members of an advantaged group. For example, some people may change their names to protect themselves from discrimination.

Some may be given privilege because they are assumed to be members of an advantaged group. For example, a bisexual person in a heterosexual relationship may be assumed to be heterosexual and thus treated differently. Understanding privilege takes conviction and deliberate self-appraisal. Controversially the term “white privilege” has been discussed under different lights.

White privilege (being the inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterised by racial inequality and injustice) is not the same as racism. It is important to remember that the concept of privilege does not assert that white people have easy lives or that their accomplishments are unearned, but rather acknowledges that white people have greater access to power and resources than those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Below are some words that could help us think and understand our privileges.



Oppression and intersectionality

Oppression

Where there is privilege, there is bound to be oppression, therefore, we must always be on the lookout for how the two interact.

As an ally, you should reflect on all the unearned benefits your privilege has given you and understand how each benefit has affected the various aspects of your lives. Doing this work will highlight what others have missing from their own lived experiences – and what they have to overcome to reach the same level. Active allies find ways to make their privilege work for others – wielding it to advance those individuals and champion their cause.

Intersectionality

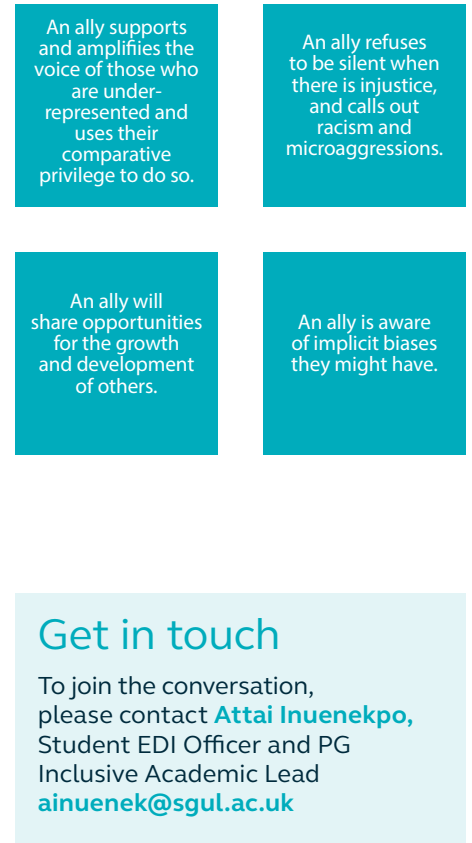
The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberly Crenshaw in 1989. The concept of intersectionality describes the ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class, and other forms of discrimination “intersect” to create unique dynamics and effects. All forms of inequality are mutually reinforcing and must therefore be analysed and addressed simultaneously to prevent one form of inequality from reinforcing another. We need to recognise that individuals have more than one identity and our lives do not revolve around a single issue.



The role of allyship in extending privilege

The diagram right highlights how we can share our privilege.

In summary, allyship is a continual investment of time in supporting others, holding ourselves accountable when mistakes are made, apologising and being prepared to rework the approach towards allyship as needs change. If you have read this far you have demonstrated the will to begin the journey of being an effective ally. Small actions lead to big impacts. We all have a role to play in advancing equitable practice in the University community and the larger society. To do this effectively we should recognise and reflect on the power and biases we may have and the potential consequences of our actions, and adopt practices that are best suited for the situation we are hoping to address.



References

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Pica-Smith, C., Contini, R.M. and Veloria, C.N. (2018) 'Social theories of migration, political realities, and the rise of interculturalism 1', *Social Justice Education in European Multi-ethnic Schools*, pp. 7–25. doi:10.4324/9781351057301-2.

Other useful resources and contacts

Student support group for the Global Majority

For more information, contact Robert Sookhan rsookhan@sgul.com

The Staff Race and Ethnicity Network holds events that are open to all and specifically to those from the Global Majority.

For more information, contact Robert Sookhan rsookhan@sgul.com

Disability Support

Contact Emma Catlow disability@sgul.ac.uk

Welfare Service

Contact Nicola Fitzgerald welfare@sgul.ac.uk

The Inclusive Education Forum

was established as a space to take forward ideas around inclusivity - origins of inclusive education framework, race equality review etc. Contact inclusiveeducation@sgul.ac.uk

Report a case of **bullying or harassment** that you have experienced yourself or that you have witnessed, using the link below.

