
A New Test Act?

EDI and Ideological Overreach

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Abstract nouns, like people, have a habit of clumping together. When it comes to people, somebody who on their own comes across as innocuous or even likeable can cease to be so when they're part of a crowd; and so it is with abstractions. Who could object to liberty, or have qualms about fraternity? Put them together with equality, however, and you get a whole which is not simply the sum of its parts: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* stands for something with a definite historical and ideological significance. When it came on the scene it was a call to arms. Aristocrats in tumbrels might have felt unpleasant associations.

A trio of abstractions currently in vogue is *Equality, Diversity, Inclusion*, or EDI. (A variant, with *Equity* instead of *Equality*, can also be found. Evolution may decide which if either becomes dominant.) Again, what more friendly notions could you find, taken individually? It's true that the friendliness is partly a function of the vagueness, just as some people appear innocuous because you can't really tell what they're committed to. But commitments do start to appear when these three nouns clump together. For of course their being clumped together is not an accident – people have clumped them together for a reason.

It is important to state these things in case it's alleged that EDI is merely a shorthand for 'best practice', 'decent behaviour', or whatever. It is not; indeed, if it were, why would it be necessary? We already know that you shouldn't treat candidates for jobs worse simply because they belong to some ethnic group, for example, and the law of the land generally protects people from such unjust treatment. And where the law itself doesn't get involved (immediately) we rely on social pressure or institutional reprimand, as with a tutor who keeps returning students' essays months late. Perhaps it will be said that EDI is a form of best practice, but that our notions of best practice need to be expanded. But that is exactly what I mean by a 'commitment': we are evidently in the realm of moral and political debate. And debate is inconsistent with the enforcement of particular views, however meritorious.

Why do I talk of 'enforcement'?

Many readers will have received a draft document emanating from the Senior Tutors' Committee, entitled 'Associate Professor Inclusive Recruitment Guidelines'. Section 1 of this document ('Include EDI selection criteria') would allow or require candidates to be asked if they support EDI and would count it in a candidate's favour if they had been active on its behalf. A flavour of how the selection criteria would be applied comes under 'Assessing Responses: Positive Indicators', where an example of a good response from a candidate is given: '[the candidate] provides clear examples where they have challenged or reported inappropriate attitudes, language and behaviour which is viewed as abusive, aggressive or discriminatory'.

The reporting of 'inappropriate attitudes' is, and has always been, one of the prime tools for enforcing orthodoxy. For what here counts as 'inappropriate' is not considered a possible matter for debate; it is in fact determined by the standards of EDI, explicitly so insofar as the context ('Positive Indicators') is a candidate's level of support for EDI values. The motive for favouring candidates for having wielded this tool seems clear: not only will the candidate (if successful) be orthodox in their new position, but they will be eager to spread the orthodoxy.¹

The Senior Tutors' Committee is not the only body within Oxford to be proposing adherence to EDI as a selection criterion for academic posts. The Race Equality Task Force has proposed the same, along with much else. In both cases, the proposals appeared in the context of documents sent out for consultation. So at present the University is merely considering whether to go down this route.

Where does our own Vice-Chancellor stand on these issues? Fortunately we know. At the V-C's Open Forum of 28 January she responded to the following pre-submitted question:

'The V-C has in the past spoken in forthright defence of free speech and thought in connection with potential threats to these within the university. That there have been and are problems with the upholding of free speech and thought in other UK universities is widely acknowledged, examples including the harassment of Kathleen Stock at Sussex University for her beliefs about trans women and the requirement on St Andrew's students to sign up to a set of statements about race as a condition for matriculating.'

One potential threat to these freedoms would be the adoption of selection criteria for academic jobs which favoured candidates who espouse a given ideology. That is true regardless of the merits of the ideology. An ideology currently promoted in this and other universities is that of EDI (Equality, Diversity, Inclusivity). This is an ideology in the sense that a person may reasonably question and/or disagree with its tenets or presuppositions; such a person would be penalised by selection criteria of the sort I'm referring to. The whole issue is liable to become even more problematic if the Freedom of Speech (Higher Education) Bill becomes law, by the way.'

Would the V-C agree that it would be wrong for Oxford University to allow the adoption of selection criteria for academic jobs which favoured candidates who espouse a given ideology?'

Because of the length of the question the V-C only read out the final sentence; but she was responding to the question as submitted, and her response was to say that she agreed 'unequivocally'. This is very good news. She did add that she was unaware of any plans to adopt such selection criteria. It is possible she had not had sight of the

proposals of the Senior Tutors' Committee and the Race Equality Task Force. For all that, her statement of principle is to be welcomed.

At present, the proposals are 'under consideration'. In Durham, they (or similar ones) were made policy. The Free Speech Union promptly wrote to the V-C reminding her of the university's legal obligations.² Durham is not the same in all respects as Oxford, but we would do well to consider carefully what will happen if we clump together with all those other institutions who embrace EDI in the way Durham has. And 'clumping together' does seem the appropriate term; one academic who submitted objections to the Senior Tutors' Committee received the response:

'The inclusion of equality and diversity criteria in further particulars has become commonplace amongst most HEIs in the UK, Europe and US. Oxford is slightly behind the curve in this respect and one of the reasons colleges, departments and faculties requested it be included in these guidelines.'

To clinch the matter the author added:

'12 Associate Professors who were appointed in 2020 and interviewed as part of the project, highlighted that for all their other job applications, they had been expected to provide similar information for student facing roles.'

In these (post-)pandemic days we are used to being given numbers rather than percentages but it would have been nice to know the total number of interviewed Associate Professors. The same goes for the unquantified 'colleges, departments and faculties'. But since when was *being behind the curve* an acceptable reason for university policy-making?

Universities are meant to contain independent-minded individuals, capable of reasoning and debate, rather than intellectual fashion victims. Indeed, to discourage independent thought is surely contrary to best practice in a big way. It seems to me that those who propose the discouragement of free and independent thinking by requiring adherence to any ideology, whether from job candidates, academics, students or staff, are acting to undermine the key values for which a university stands. It is good to know we have a Vice-Chancellor who agrees.

¹A policy of encouraging the reporting (possibly anonymous) of others' verbal misbehaviour was recently mooted at Cambridge University; commentators dubbed it a 'snitches' charter' and the negative publicity seems to have contributed to the V-C's decision to resign. So it is a policy that can backfire.

²See <https://freespeechunion.org/letter-to-professor-karen-obrien-vice-chancellor-of-durham-university-concerning-a-diversity-pledge-that-applicants-for-assistant-professorships-are-required-to-make/>

Remember that a wealth of information about the University has now been made available by the EJRA Review Group;
<https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/working-at-oxford/ejra#tab-3236066>