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Exhausting, divisive and irrational

Academia must undo the excesses of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion agenda

ARTILLERY ROW
By
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The Critic

All the movements and ideas discussed in my recent essay about academic radicalism might have remained partial but not overwhelming presences in universities were it not for the extent to which they have been taken up not only within scholarly debate, but by the industry for Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI – the US term)/Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI – the UK term). Most people working in universities will have encountered this, and many would support the principles of equality of opportunity and non-discrimination. But in practice, DEI/EDI frequently encompasses many of the ideological tropes given at the end of the previous article.

In the UK, a series of Freedom of Information requests from the organisation Alumni for Free Speech revealed 515 EDI staff employed in EDI positions at UK universities (with the University of Sheffield in top place with almost 60, followed by Southampton, Lancaster, UCL and Heriot-Watt), in contrast to a total of just 5 employees for academic freedom or free speech. The DEI/EDI industry exerts considerable influence on university hires (and sometimes retention and promotion as well), with applications regularly requiring compulsory "diversity statements" which serve in reality as ideological litmus tests and means of weeding out politically divergent applicants. This has led to formal lawsuits in the US on grounds of discrimination, and can have a significant impact upon academic freedom.

Various others have identified DEI/EDI as a central concern. In an article citing the experiences of others as well as his own, Maximilian Werner, Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric Studies at the University of Utah, argues that axiomatic beliefs underlying EDI policies (including those relating to "positionality", assumptions that requirements of writing in Standard Academic English reinforce racism, and general assumptions of negative associations of anything associated with a "Western tradition") are placed outside of the realms of proper critical and rigorous discussion, claiming that this amounts to "the *argument from authority* fallacy", in opposition to academic ideals of collegiality, critical thinking and open inquiry.

Madeleine Armstrong identifies EDI strategies as "a clear example" of leftist tendencies "to hide illiberal measures behind moral truisms". She blames in particular the 2010 Equality Act, passed in the last months of a Labour Government, requiring public institutions to take an active approach to promoting certain groups where their participation is low compared to their representation amongst the wider public. Doug Stokes has also expressed his disdain for this act and urged that it be rescinded. US journalist Conor Friedersdorf has argued that the use of mandatory diversity

statements in hiring processes serves as a means to ensure that those who obtain work conform to a narrow range of values. Mathematician John Armstrong has traced the ways in which EDI imperatives relating to ethics committees, grant funding, peer review, and invitations to speak at seminars and conferences often come into conflict with scientific processes and methods, for example when prohibiting the collection of data on biological sex. At present, sociologist Alice Sullivan is heading a review commissioned by the Science Secretary on the collection of data by public bodies in this respect.

Philosopher Arif Ahmed, now Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom at the Office for Students, argued prior to taking up this role that many UK universities had become "instruments of political indoctrination", making comparisons with education in the Soviet Union. He drew attention to the ways in which the University of St Andrew's required that students pass a "diversity" module in order to matriculate, the University of Cambridge attempted to make all staff undergo "race awareness" training (and even attempting to police "beliefs" which were claimed to "reproduce a system") and similar indoctrination in "unconscious bias" could be found at a whole host of other institutions, some explicitly calling themselves "anti-racist institutions", as such instilling one of the fundamental tenets of CRT into their mission. He linked this to data demonstrating that in a corporate environment, insisting upon "diversity training", whilst making companies *appear* to be "doing something", did not result in increased representation of members of minority groups in management; the numbers had actually decreased, leading Ahmed to suggest that "Compulsory training may actively be making things *worse*".

Imperial College, London used its EDI web pages to urge staff to be "allies" of LGBTQ+ people, but in the manner of Stonewall (to whom they are encouraged to donate). Staff were encouraged to accompany trans or non-binary people to public conveniences, to wear rainbow lanyards, always tell people their pronouns, and call out "transphobic" comments, in line with "a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of transphobia". Even senior staff faced intimidating responses if they deviated from the party line. What is "transphobic" is highly contested, while the beliefs of staff who maintain the reality of biological sex are protected under the Equality Act, and neither Imperial nor any other institution has any business attempting to silence debate in this manner.

In the UK, many EDI departments pledge allegiance to the ideals of Stonewall or Athena Swan, both of which have become hardline proponents of gender identity theory, seeking elimination of single-sex toilets, facilities and the like and denying the validity of considerations of biological sex. Such a model, as also with the Race Equality Charter, constitutes a form of "outsourcing" of policy decisions, as argued by Sullivan and Armstrong, so that critical issues are removed from debate, and institutions rewarded by the extent to which they conform to the ideals of external bodies, a severe threat to academic freedom.

Investor and liberal Democrat Bill Ackman was surprised to find that the DEI mandate at Harvard did not extend to Asians and Jewish people. This is intolerable anywhere; the rights of all groups should be protected equally, but such mandates are a major source of the current debates relating to antisemitism on campus, as observed by one former DEI director in the US who was fired for opposing certain policies,

having been called a "dirty Zionist" and told that Jews were "white oppressors". Not all policies ostensibly relating to DEI/EDI are like this, nor do all those charged with them necessarily subscribe to such beliefs, but there are sufficient cases for there to be real reason for concern. UK Science Secretary Michelle Donelan wrote publicly to express concern that UKRI had given positions on its own EDI advisory group to those who have expressed support for Hamas, a proscribed group in the UK.

Sullivan and Judith Suissa have argued that the fundamental values of equality and inclusion are not inherently in opposition with academic freedom, and attempts to restrict the latter often hit marginalised groups most. However, as argued by Amna Khalid and Jeffrey Aaron Snyder, it is facile to pretend there are no conflicts between existing DEI/EDI imperatives and those of academic freedom. A whole range of prominent cases, such as those of Kathleen Stock, Almut Gadow and many others amply demonstrate this.

Various commentators, in particular Heather Mac Donald, identify just how problematic a way forward which essentially expands the range of speech codes and restrictions to encompass antisemitism would be. Only where there is direct incitement to violence, or other forms of physical intimidation or threats, is disciplinary action legitimate. Using the current state of affairs to allow the existing DEI/EDI bureaucracy to expand and dominate academic life yet further (as is planned at the University of Michigan) is to bolster the very phenomenon which played a major part in bringing about this situation. What is needed is a proper culture of intellectual inquiry in which views which some may find offensive will be robustly challenged.

Decolonisation and activism in place of scholarship

One common aspect of such policies is the idea of "decolonising the curriculum", which was urged in a report by the Higher Education Policy Institute, and to which a fifth of UK universities had committed themselves in 2020. I have written elsewhere on how such a venture is hardly meaningful without proper education in the history of colonialism (and not just that undertaken by Western powers), and on the simplistic arguments used in the name of "decolonisation" to remove classical music from education.

What is clear from reading some of the writings and policy documents on this is that such a venture does not simply entail a commitment to a more globally-oriented curriculum, but is more of a full-frontal attack on most existing forms of education, and a level of hatred towards all things Western which is almost pathological.

A statement from Edinburgh College of Art says that "Decolonising the Curriculum starts with a process of learning and unlearning about the West's colonial past and how its system of knowledge and power has shaped other parts of the world" and speaks of "the dominant system of knowledge based arising [*sic*] out of Modernity/Coloniality and the Enlightenment is not the only system of knowledge and the violence that this has done to people" and "our own specific discipline, like the majority of others within the Western university, is shaped by colonial, patriarchal, ableist and elite ideologies and knowledge systems that present themselves as universal, whilst negating other realities". A report about a study from

the University of Nottingham claims in an accusing manner that "The study reveals that only a minority of staff are willing to decolonise the curriculum. Staff in some Faculties do not think that EDI applies to them or are reluctant to think through the colonial dimensions to their work." A chart at Loughborough implores staff to "Demonstrate the operation of the 'master's tools'", "expose … the institutionalisation of norms, the rules of the game" and "decolonise, acknowledge power inequalities, read dominant voices through the lenses of domination". There are many more similar statements, generally presented as imperatives rather than issues for critical discussion.

But the clearest expression of the real thinking behind this ideology can be found in the collection of essays entitled *Decolonising the University*, edited by a team headed by sociologist Gurminder K. Bhambra. Various of the authors make abundantly clear their opposition to the possibility of objective knowledge, liberalism, enlightenment, or even civility of exchange, but a chapter by geographer Angela Last makes clearest the cynical agenda of manipulating university bureaucracies towards their own end in a Leninist fashion:

> …an unexpected ally offers itself to the decolonial activist: the internationalisation strategies of university managements. At my own institution at the time of writing, the University of Glasgow, the first sentence of their internationalisation strategy, following De Wits and Knight, reads as follows: '"Internationalization" is considered to be the process of integrating an international or intercultural dimension in to our teaching, research and service functions'. In this strategy document, we also find the main aim, namely '[t]o enhance the student experience at Glasgow by offering a culturally diverse learning environment that prepares students for global employment and citizenship and an experience built upon a wide range of world class support services, from point of enquiry to post graduation'.

> Although such aims and intentions can be interpreted in many different ways, they can operate to the benefit of decolonial education activists who, theoretically or practically, can draw upon such documents as soon as they hit an obstacle in their immediate environment. Armed with the power of official policy, they can wield management-speak about economic and career advantages, creating enlightening images about future diverse student bodies and ensuing equality awards: 'our curriculum change will generate your rewards'

Elsewhere in the volume, Carol Azumah Dennis writes that:

> … a decolonising education is one that exceeds the confines of the school, college or university to intervene in the reinvention of the world. A decolonising education is an activist one that makes use of the language, time and authorial voice provided by the university to accomplish its purposes. It is not a discipline but a practice of weaving the threads of resistance, opposition and insurgency to prefiguratively build a different world.

There should be no doubt that these figures are interested in exploiting universities for their own activist purposes, and that these aims lie behind a lot of "decolonisation" rhetoric.

The great sociologist Max Weber wrote in his famed essay "Science as a Vocation" (an essay also cited by Niall Ferguson) that "politics has no place in the lecture room as far as the lecturer is concerned. Least of all if his subject is the academic study of politics", going on to make a clear distinction between having political opinions and analysing political institutions and policies, as well as finding the type of rhetoric used in a public meeting to be deplorable in an academic context.

Many academics would retort that all thought and teaching entails "politics", and all delivery is a form of rhetoric; this may be a convenient argument for those who wish to dissolve the distinction between scholarship and activism, but simply will not do. It is perfectly possible for those of varied political persuasions to agree that certain events or phenomena are as objectively verifiable as is possible within the current state of knowledge, and while they may tend towards different types of interpretation of such things, also recognise that such a process is not merely subjective, but is and should be constrained by what can be supported by the evidence. Whether smoking tobacco seriously increases susceptibility to cancer and other diseases, whether the earth is round or flat, or whether a missile which hit a hospital in Gaza was fired by the IDF or by Hamas, are not simply questions entirely contingent on one's political perspective — some answers to these can be argued with far more rigour than others.

And much more difficult questions such as which nations bear primary responsibility for the outbreak of World War One, or even which artistic movements in the early 20th century can be considered most historically significant, are not rendered purely subjective simply by virtue of their complexity. Without having to insist on singular answers to either, attempts to grapple with them grounded in evidence, thorough critical interpretation thereof, incorporating significant wider historical knowledge, as well as rigorous reasoning on the basis of available evidence and existing scholarship, will be far more cogent and convincing than those answered on simply on a whim, or on the basis of political preference. A political activist is sure of the basic convictions which inform their activism; a scholar needs to be continuously questioning and testing their assumptions. It is possible to be both, but the two should not be confused. When the primary task of the educator is to communicate their political "truth", Marcuse-style, and to shut out all alternatives, then the university has lost all meaning.

Weber also instructed "the prophet and the demagogue" to "go out into the street and speak to the public", where they could be criticised, whereas students were expected to remain silent. Writing in 1918 Germany, it was much less common for students to challenge their professors than today. Nonetheless, students are aware of the immense power differential separating them from their lecturers, and for such lecturers to exploit this to propagate their own propaganda to those only at an early stage of developing the critical skills to challenge it is an abuse of their position.

Ways forward in a UK context

There are many differences between higher education in the UK and US. Formal tenure was abolished in the UK in 1988 by the Thatcher government; tenure still

exists in the US, although it is undermined by increasing casualisation of the sector (also a significant factor in the UK). There is no First Amendment protecting free speech in the UK, though private universities in the US are not formally bound by this. Furthermore, the funding structure and role of the state in UK higher education, through government loan schemes, funding of research, and more, is of a quite different nature to that in the US. And perhaps most significantly, 82 per cent of the UK population identifies as belonging to a white ethnic group, compared to 58.9 per cent in the US, while the very different histories lead to different conceptions of "settler" and "indigenous" people in either country. As a UK citizen and one who works in that country, my concern is primarily with higher education here, though much can be learned (sometimes negatively) from US experiences.

It is clear that various individuals are trying to impose a fixed ideological agenda in UK universities, not least through EDI institutions, and are either unable or unwilling to engage in debate on the related issues. A combination of social justice ideology and postmodern thought have brought about in some parts of the sector a loss of faith in truth, knowledge, expertise and critical thought, the very things upon which universities need most fundamentally to focus. A lack of these make possible an alternative world of didactic, sometimes hateful slogans, absurd conspiracy theories (often antisemitic), informed by stark, extreme and polarised politics. There is, as Stokes, Mac Donald and others have observed, a climate of profound antipathy in various institutions to practically anything which can be constructed as "Western"; amongst the most absurd outcomes of this was the partial embracing by cultural critic Andrew Ross of New Age spiritualism and alternative medicine as alternatives to Eurocentric rationality. Furthermore, there is a good deal of rhetoric about "whiteness" as a type of pathology, which would be obviously racist if applied to any other group. White teenagers are now the group least likely to go to the UK's top universities relative to their proportion of the population, but if they do, they will nonetheless often be berated for "white privilege". Furthermore, policy initiatives founded upon such ideologies clearly fuel antisemitism, as Jewish people can be constructed as "white", as well as "settler-colonialists".

There have been various important earlier policy documents relating to the protection of academic freedom, in particular the "Chicago Trifecta" (containing the Kalven report (1967), Shils report (1972) and Chicago Principles (2014)), all of which can meaningfully inform policies for today. A proposed new constitution for the University of Pennsylvania offers many positive ways forward: intellectual diversity, civil discourse, administrative and institutional neutrality, further neutrality with respect to scientific investigation and respect for the scientific method, and wider respect and tolerance. These overlap considerably with the founding values of the London Universities' Council for Academic Freedom (LUCAF) and those of the Council on Academic Freedom at Harvard, which informed those of LUCAF. Steven Pinker, a leading figure in the formation of the Harvard Council, has put forward a five-point plan for Harvard of a similar nature, entailing clear policies on free speech and academic freedom, institutional neutrality, non-violence and removing the "heckler's veto" from protected free speech, viewpoint diversity, and the disempowering of DEI bureaucracies.

I am not claiming that all UK universities, or all schools or departments within any single institution, are equally problematic. My own institution has thankfully seen a

strong commitment to and defence of academic freedom from the top. But I believe it is only through proper measures, including and building upon the 2022 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act, that it is possible to respond meaningfully to the very real issues which have arisen.

It would be an intolerable constraint on academic freedom to disallow academics from putting forward views of one or other ideological persuasion; a requirement for political impartiality, as required by law in primary and secondary education, would not be appropriate at tertiary level, when educating adults. Nonetheless, it is important to protect the intellectual freedom of both staff and students, and so statutory measures are needed to prevent ideological gatekeeping when it comes to appointments, promotions, and indeed when marking student work. No student should be penalised for putting forward a position of their own which is at odds with ideological orthodoxies, including those of DEI/EDI, CRT or decolonisation, so long as their work is rigorously argued and substantiated. This requires not only institutional neutrality on such issues (and as such the eschewal of ideologically loaded DEI or decolonisation statements) but also some independent auditing, with the possibility of penalties such as fines, removal of funding or access to loans for institutions which will not comply. Institutional neutrality should become a statutory requirement for an institution to qualify as a university. Arif Ahmed is absolutely right in saying that "politically or ideologically oriented training or induction" has "no place in a university". This may seem a major change, but I believe this is vital in order to reestablish trust in universities as genuine centres of learning rather than places for political indoctrination.

It would be neither desirable nor practical to bracket out genuine considerations of DEI/EDI in universities. Asking interviewees for an academic position how they would teach a group of students who might come at a subject with different cultural assumptions to those of the academic is legitimate and useful; to use such a question to ensure that they subscribe to the assumptions of CRT is quite a different thing. What is required is that where such assumptions are contentious and contested, decisions should only be made by academics (rather than non-academic staff), and should never be removed from critical debate, including in the classroom, in order to make this more inclusive of diverse viewpoints. As such, many of the bureaucracies which have developed around these issues do indeed need taking apart and new ways found to ensure students and staff are protected from exclusion and discrimination in ways which still protect intellectual diversity. Equality of *opportunity* should not be confused with equality of *outcome*; to work to break down barriers to opportunity is a noble mission, to enforce particular outcomes is to make a mockery of the learning process. Furthermore, it is time to expose the racket of "decolonisation" and produce proper guides to inform students and teachers of the extent to which this has taken hold at institutions to which they might be considering applying.

Philosophers Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze were somewhat obsessively preoccupied by "difference". In various linguistic and philosophical contexts this makes sense, and relates to a tradition of thought going back at least as far as Hegel asserting the fundamental interdependence of identity and difference. But "difference" as an almost fetishistic priority in an academic context also requires questioning. It is often a *sine qua non* that the academic interests, aspirations, priorities, and desires of students of different demographic groups must be fundamentally at odds with each

other; indeed, for the proponents of CRT, they must be irreconcilable. But is this necessarily true in all respects? Might students of many backgrounds commonly aspire to a good, rigorous education which provides them with knowledge and skills which will help them to flourish post-graduation? Might many different students find various cultural or intellectual pursuits equally fascinating and enticing, whether or not they necessarily mirror their own life experiences? A student does not need to be Greek to find value in Plato, nor Japanese to appreciate *The Tale of Genji*. And more broadly, might there still be various concerns which can be considered universal – the need for all people to be provided with food, affordable housing, medical treatment, properly paid employment, safety on the streets, protection from terrorism targeting civilians, and of course the right to a full and proper education? Difference is an entirely legitimate and important concern, but so is commonality. Greg Lukianoff and Haidt, in their 2018 book *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are setting up a generation for failure*, have contrasted in this manner "common humanity identity politics" with "common enemy identity politics". Simply to admit the former into some universities as a *possibility* would be a step forward.