



THE EDI OPPONENTS OF EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

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The framing of discourse on “cancel culture” in universities often casts student activists in the role of enemies of open, rational discourse. And it is true that students, at least in the US and the UK, have become markedly more censorious in recent years ([Hillman 2022](#); [Haidt and Lukianoff 2018](#)). However, this narrative typically neglects the powerful role played by Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI; often referred to in the US as DEI) structures, which have enabled some staff (both academic and professional) to become activists on the university payroll, with a high level of influence over bureaucratic decision-making. EDI expansionism has been enabled by a longer-term weakening of academic governance and concomitant bureaucratic usurpation of academic prerogatives, including the curriculum ([Ginsberg 2013](#)). This, in turn, is intimately linked to the marketization of the sector.

In this article, we describe a trend for EDI staff and networks in Higher Education to attempt to impose a particular ideological viewpoint, thereby curtailing the scope of fact and opinion that can be expressed within the university. Demographic diversity and viewpoint diversity are distinct goals, and both should be valued by EDI ([Fanshawe 2021](#)). Yet the current trend, we argue, is not only a threat to viewpoint diversity and academic freedom but is also antithetical to serious equalities work that seeks to uphold the rights of all. It is ironic that these threats emanate from people who claim to be promoting equality, diversity and inclusion.

Universities have always contained activists, and many academics successfully combine rigorous scholarship with political activism, with disciplinary expertise and research findings often informing practical change. There may be grey areas between activism and research, but what concerns us here is the relatively recent phenomenon of overreach by university EDI staff and networks who aim to reshape the university in line with a narrow ideological agenda ([Biggs 2018](#)).

Endeavors to widen participation in higher education are a longstanding element of the struggle to create more socially just societies. However, we suggest that EDI initiatives in the HE sector do not necessarily lead to greater equality and diversity or to inclusion for all. Instead, certain ideas are sanctified by adherents of a particular theoretical position, often at the price of violating existing legal rights. The identitarian politics that sometimes dominate EDI activism often have little to say about economic inequalities, in contrast to a politics rooted in materialist and class analysis ([Reiff 2022](#); [Reid 2022](#)).

Irrespective of one’s position in the debate around “the redistribution-recognition dilemma” (see [Fraser 1995](#)), identity is an important category in politics, enabling the understanding of and action against injustice, oppression, and prejudice on the basis of the shared experience of marginalized social groups. Yet

contemporary political activism that focuses on collective identities as “dearly-held, self-fashioning, and self-justifying essences” ([Kumar et al. 2018](#)) rather than materially rooted can lead to an impoverished understanding of power ([McNay 2007](#)). The potential for identity claims to legitimate existing privilege is therefore ripe among activists focused on the superficially virtuous goal of acknowledging the claims of identity-based groups. This is even more likely to be the case when the identity in question is claimed not on the basis of material reality—as with feminist demands to recognize women as a sex class—but on the basis of individual, subjective reporting—as with trans activists’ demands to recognize as a woman anybody who claims to be a woman. Within this framing, a white male professor can identify as “genderqueer” and hence be treated as a member of an oppressed group.

While EDI departments and officials are charged with overseeing all issues of equality and diversity on campus (including, for example, disability, religion or belief, race, age, and sex), it is frequently the case that [protected characteristics](#) ([Equality Act 2010](#)) other than sexuality and gender reassignment are neglected due to the current dominance, within EDI activism, of activists aligned with a particular ideological position. EDI departments thus often endorse a tacit hierarchy of rights. Not only is gender identity prioritized at the expense of sex, but practical action for staff and students who are materially disadvantaged—for example, to improve access for disabled people or increase the representation of people from working-class backgrounds—is treated as lower priority than demonstrations of allegiance to the LGBTQ+ cause. The associated activism frequently emphasizes performative actions, which can end up silencing and censoring non-compliant voices ([McWhorter 2020](#)).

In the UK, EDI departments typically set up activist LGBTQ+ networks, often at the instigation of lobby group Stonewall ([Sullivan 2022](#)), and consult these groups extensively on policy and practice. These groups are generally aligned with gender-identity theory, thus excluding staff with lesbian, gay or bisexual orientations who do not subscribe to this ideology while including heterosexual “allies.”

The increasing dominance and politicization of EDI departments within universities is a phenomenon the UK has imported from elite US universities. EDI professionals in administrative roles typically work alongside other university staff who have self-selected into EDI roles for part of their time. Some of these staff are motivated by their desire to promote particular positions in ongoing political campaigns. Here we focus on the way this has played out in the UK context, in the area of sex and gender.

Activists subscribing to gender-identity theory (the view that sex as a category does not exist or does not matter) have taken on significant EDI positions within universities. These activists often combine epistemological relativism with moral zealotry ([Wight 2020](#)). Some are academics whose work draws on Queer Theory, a broad intellectual approach that challenges the existence of stable identities or dualistic categories, arguing that not just gender but also sex is constructed and “performed” ([Butler 2006](#)). Others, in unrelated disciplines, have simply adopted this theoretical position as activists.

Lowrey ([2021: 759](#)) points out the incongruity of the alliance between Queer Theory and bureaucracy:

At first blush, this would seem an unlikely alignment. Scholars influenced by Foucault usually figure themselves as political revolutionaries, while administrators looking to remake the university are unabashedly influenced by capitalist models ([Christensen & Eyring, 2011](#)). Where their interests intersect is in their shared contempt for the traditional university and their shared sense that nothing is more vital than deconstructing and reconstructing it along novel lines...From an administrative point of view, EDI creates unprecedented entrée into processes once, frustratingly, entirely in the hands of faculty: hiring, promoting, and honoring. From a revolutionary faculty point of view, a berth in administration is no longer a cross to be borne for some portion of an academic career but instead the best means to do the most

important possible work because it affords an opportunity to transform the social construction of knowledge, which they take to be key to remaking the world.

Irrespective of the motivations of those taking on these roles, EDI work has shifted away from opposing unlawful discrimination and towards the promotion of a particular ideological perspective. This shift has had systematic implications for higher education, from staff training and the student curriculum ([Sokal 2021](#); [Advance HE 2019](#)) to equalities monitoring and recruitment and promotion processes ([Sailer 2022](#)).

There is no inherent tension between the values of equality and inclusion and that of academic freedom. Indeed, as [Kenan Malik \(2022\)](#) commented regarding the recent violent attack on Salman Rushdie, it is often the most marginalized and disempowered individuals who are victims of restrictions on free speech, given that “what is deemed ‘offence to a community’ is more often a debate within communities” and that progressive political movements rely on being able to “speak truth to power.” Rushdie himself both embodies and has articulated such arguments ([Rushdie 2015](#)).

EDI roles should hold responsibility for upholding the rights and protections of all groups within the diverse staff and student population. Entryism into such roles by activists committed to promoting a particular ideological agenda has led to a situation where university employees whose views do not align with this agenda can find their academic freedom compromised. This extends well beyond overt attempts to silence academics.

Commentators on the “culture wars” frequently make the argument that there is no crisis of academic freedom and that claims to the contrary are merely the latest weapons to be used by powerful elites in a backlash against the forces of social justice (see, for example, [Ramsay 2021](#)). Proponents of the view that there is no real threat to academic freedom in the UK often cite a [2018 BBC Freedom of Information request](#) claiming that there had only been six occasions since 2010 on which universities had cancelled speakers as a result of complaints and only four cases of course content being changed as a result of student complaints, or a [WONKHE](#) survey of 61 student unions that showed that in 2019-2020, student unions claimed to have cancelled just six events. These reports are treated as authoritative, yet it is unclear what data student unions and universities would have used in responding to such requests for information. In our experience, no-platforming is usually done furtively, with some attempt at concealment ([Sullivan 2021](#)), and the idea that accurate records of these incidents are kept and reported seems extraordinarily naïve.

More fundamentally, as we have argued elsewhere ([Suissa and Sullivan 2021](#)), to equate threats to academic freedom *only* with overt instances of no-platforming and cancellation of events is to wildly misunderstand the reality of academic life and to ignore what is happening on the ground. High-profile cases of public figures whose invitations to speak on campus have been revoked represent only the most visible manifestation of a deeper structural issue ([Ahmed et al. 2022](#)).

Similarly, the focus on curriculum changes made in response to student complaints glosses over systematic EDI-led curriculum change, which usurps expert control over the syllabus ([Advance HE 2019](#)). One example is a current [Quality Assurance Agency \(QAA\) consultation](#) on the subject benchmark for university mathematics that suggests that the mathematics curriculum should be “decolonized” and that students should be taught that some past mathematicians had “problematic” views. This implies that mathematical content must be displaced from the curriculum in favor of teaching a particular political and theoretical perspective.

The implications of EDI becoming a vehicle for activist staff go far beyond overt attempts to silence academics. Nevertheless, our experience of an attempt, led by staff in EDI roles, to shut down a conference on women’s rights provides some instructive insights into EDI activism.

Women's Liberation 2020

We were co-organizers with Woman's Place UK (WPUK) of an event, in February 2020, marking 50 years since the first Women's Liberation Conference at Ruskin College, Oxford. It brought together academics, politicians, journalists, lawyers, and activists working in fields such as women's rights, domestic abuse, and sex trafficking. University College London (UCL) has a code of practice on freedom of speech and a policy for managing external events, both of which were fully complied with by the conference organizers.

Ten UCL colleagues posted a [letter](#) virulently attacking the conference organizers and demanding that the then-Provost prevent this conference on women's rights from going ahead at UCL. The letter-writers used the familiar tactic of smearing the characters of individuals involved in the conference rather than engaging with the content, which they did not mention in their letter. They denounced our third-sector partners WPUK in defamatory terms:

WPUK's views on gender identity are transphobic and discriminatory. They go against everything that UCL has been trying to do in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion, and are in direct contradiction to Stonewall's UK Workplace Equality Index.

It goes without saying that the accusation of "transphobia" is a complete distortion, at least in the ordinary sense of that word ([Sokal 2022](#)). WPUK fully supports the right of transgender people to live their lives free from harassment, discrimination, and violence—a right enshrined in the 2010 Equality Act, where "gender reassignment" is one of nine protected characteristics. However, WPUK does disagree with what the letter-writers rather tendentiously called "proposed improvements [sic] to the Gender Recognition Act."

The letter concludes with an explicit call for UCL administrators to cancel the conference on the grounds that: "Letting this conference go ahead will result in a huge backlash from staff and students, and cause considerable reputational damage to the university. It will also cause emotional damage to trans colleagues and students."

Six of the leading signatories of this unambiguous attack on viewpoint diversity and women's freedom of association within the university were EDI leads for their faculties, called "EDI vice deans," while others were prominent in UCL-supported LGBTQ+ activist networks. Despite the fact that these colleagues publicized their petition in the [student press](#), the number of signatories—even counting students—was decidedly modest. Nevertheless, they succeeded in creating substantial difficulties for us as organizers.

These EDI activists pressured UCL managers to prevent the event from going ahead, leading to a raft of excessive demands on the organizers. We were told to put the release of tickets on hold; we were asked to record every session (including workshops where survivors of sexual violence and other vulnerable women had agreed to speak); and we were asked to hire extra security to cover every room used for our more than 30 parallel sessions, thus imposing prohibitive costs that could have only been met by charging a far higher ticket price and thereby making the conference far less inclusive.

We were even told that we should invite further speakers to present an alternative viewpoint so as to ensure "balance." It is hard to imagine what would qualify as an "alternative view" on a panel entitled "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls."

None of the letter-writers contacted us to ask for more information about the conference, which they would of course have been welcome to attend and during which they would have been free to express their views. In fact, they rebuffed our attempts to arrange a meeting to discuss the matter with them and address any concerns they may have had about the proposed conference program.

While academics expect their work to be subject to criticism and peer review, there is a vast difference between rejecting a conference paper or a journal article following a review of its contents by academics within the relevant field, and rejecting an entire conference program, speaker or event purely on the basis of the topic or the identity of the speaker, based on political rather than scholarly objections. Those who defend no-platforming sometimes appear willfully blind to the difference between scholarly judgment and attempts to silence experts by activists who have prejudged a case on the basis of their ideological position.

At the time of the conference, the UK government was carrying out a consultation on changes to the Gender Recognition Act (2004), a piece of legislation that was intended to allow transsexual people to change their legal sex. Proposed changes would have allowed gender self-identification, meaning that anyone could change their legal sex on request. This proposal was the subject of much public interest. WPUK opposed gender self-ID on the grounds that it would undermine women's existing legal rights, for example the rights to single-sex spaces and sports.

The signatories' citing of UCL's membership of Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index as a reason for objecting to the conference is illustrative of the alignment of EDI activists with a particular ideological position, rather than with a general commitment to upholding equalities legislation. Stonewall is a lobby group that advocates for gender self-identification, demanding affirmation of the mantra "Trans Women Are Women" and explicitly stating that there is "no debate" on questions of sex and gender. EDI colleagues would have been committed to achieving a high ranking in Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index ([Sullivan 2022](#)) and explicitly alleged a conflict between hosting a conference on women's rights and membership of the Stonewall scheme.

As a result of these threatening tactics by activists, we did not know until the morning of the conference whether it would be allowed to proceed. In the end, the conference did go ahead, with around a thousand women (and a few men) attending an enormously stimulating and successful event that featured high-profile speakers and panel discussions covering a wide range of topics, including law and policy relating to women.

The event received favorable national media coverage on Radio 4's "[Woman's Hour](#)." A student protest attracted only around 30 protesters; UCL has over 40,000 students. (A student who co-organized the protest was subsequently hired by UCL in an EDI role). One notable feature of the conference was the high level of lesbian representation and visibility among both speakers and attendees. It is ironic that EDI representatives should have opposed such an event.

Critics claiming there is no crisis of academic freedom in universities would likely point to the fact that the conference went ahead as evidence for their claim. Certainly, UCL deserves credit for its handling of such issues compared to other universities such as Edinburgh ([Benjamin 2021](#)), Essex ([Reindorf 2021](#)), and Sussex ([Stock 2021](#)). Yet this failed attempt at no-platforming highlighted the barriers to open and collegial discussion on sex and gender. As senior and experienced staff in secure positions, we were able to invest the considerable resources of time, effort, and intellectual energy required to resist the unreasonable demands that UCL managers—at the instigation of EDI activists—attempted to place on the conference. [Junior and precariously employed](#) workers are less well-placed to negotiate with powerful senior managers and push back against their demands. Given the emotional and professional costs of speaking out on this issue ([Griffiths 2021](#)), it is unlikely that such staff would take the risk of trying to organize such an event in the first place—or of engaging with such "contentious" topics in their teaching or research. These tactics therefore, even if they are ultimately unsuccessful in a given instance, send a powerful warning message to individuals who dissent from the dominant ideological position. In such cases, as in cases where HR investigates individual staff members following anonymous complaints about alleged transphobia, even when such complaints turn out to be groundless, "the process is the punishment."

The example above is illustrative of a pattern of behavior. Subsequently, UCL's EDI committee lobbied to remain within schemes run by Stonewall, and LGBT+ networks objected to the fact that academic governance ultimately prevailed in taking a different view ([Adams 2021](#)).

UCL staff in EDI roles were also among activists who signed an [open letter](#) objecting to one of us (AS) being platformed by Advance HE, a sector-led charity that runs national EDI frameworks Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter ([Sullivan and Armstrong 2022a](#)), to talk about the subject of sex and data collection. The letter described her views as “dangerously transphobic.” AS’s talk simply expressed the view that universities should collect data on sex as well as data on gender identity ([Sullivan and Armstrong 2022b](#); [Sullivan 2021](#)). In fact, there is a Public Sector Equality Duty on UK universities to collect data on sex as part of their equalities monitoring. To fail to do so would be unlawful. AS was therefore smeared as transphobic for advocating that universities should comply with the law. Interestingly, the open letter was published after an attempt to have AS no-platformed on this particular occasion had already failed. The goal of the letter was to intimidate the hosts of the event, Advance HE, in the hope that they would not engage further with the views of academics who take a materialist view of sex in line with current UK equalities legislation.

What Are the Implications?

One possible response to incidents such as those we describe above is to frame the attempt to silence as itself a form of free speech ([Letsas 2022](#)). But this is to invoke the Heckler’s Veto ([Cherminsky 2010](#)), confusing the right to protest with a right to silence others. Speech that is merely intended to silence the speech of others, far from contributing to knowledge and learning, narrows the scope of the educational sphere. To frame attempts to silence as equally valued speech ignores the educational purpose of the university.

A “both sides” framing also ignores the power dynamic at play, whereby activists with institutional power who are often ignorant of the body of knowledge or the diversity of views within relevant fields seek to silence the discipline-based arguments of academics, often without first attempting to discover what those arguments are. Though activism on campus may be defended on free-speech grounds, universities should be mindful of the chilling effects of such activism when it strays into attempts to impose a particular viewpoint on the university as a public institution. Even failed attempts at no-platforming can generate a climate of fear, intimidation, and self-censorship. Activists routinely use libelous statements and attempts to de-platform with the aim of creating an intimidating and hostile environment for people with the protected belief that sex is real and immutable ([Forstater v. CGD](#)). Such behavior is particularly egregious when carried out by activists in EDI roles.

To be ignorantly intolerant of any differing creed, belief or opinion is the definition of bigotry. The work of addressing injustice and inequality requires engaging in difficult conversations and balancing conflicting views, not freezing out dissent. It is gravely ironic that EDI has become a source of harassment and discrimination for women and other university staff who believe that sex matters. It is especially troubling that attacks on academic freedom, viewpoint diversity, and the long-standing norms of scholarly debate have emanated from staff in EDI roles. Universities need to take a hard look at the structures they have created and how they can be reformed to promote genuine equality, diversity, and inclusion.

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