

EDITORIAL

While Terminologies on Diversity and Fairness Evolve, Universities Should Maintain Long-Held Commitments

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Views about identity are subject to change, and so is the language utilized to explain experiences related to difference and exclusion within universities. Issue [104](#) of *International Higher Education* included a special section addressing anti-Black racism, as experienced by international students and as a pervasive experience in study abroad practices, along with the perils of university presidents making public pronouncements on social issues. Over the five years since its publication, things have changed dramatically and, as Jamil Salmi has [noted](#), the backlash against equity policies in higher education is evident and constitutes a global phenomenon. Certain terms have become flashpoints in increasingly polarized societies, but it is important to recognize the impossibility of studying higher education from a comparative perspective without understanding the basic characteristics of the student body or the academic staff. In other words, it is impossible to ignore diversity in higher education.

As governments around the world have fixated on making their institutions competitive in the global arena, existing hierarchies among institutions have been accentuated. This has put a critical spotlight on selective admissions, even though a very small proportion of institutions are selective. Such an emphasis reveals a tacit agreement that admission to higher education should be fair. Whether fairness should be determined on the basis of academic performance alone, or whether hardships or personal characteristics, including race, should be considered, must be debated and remain debatable within universities. In other words, equity cannot be extricated from the study of higher education either.

The Dangers of Anticipatory Compliance

Despite the clear importance of these topics for both our scholarly and professional field, they are not being defended, at least in public. Instead, self-censorship and anticipatory compliance appear to be taking hold. Academics are retreating from activities that are central to their professional roles, such as making remarks that can be perceived as critical of their government or offering commentary to the press. There are multiple and significant exceptions, but a chilly climate is evident.

What is more concerning yet is that teaching is also showing signs of self-censorship. While violations of academic freedom are documented and very concerning, they are also extremely rare in most contexts. It is increasingly common to hear “we can’t say that” or “we can’t use that word” on campus; sometimes this is said ironically, sometimes the tone is unclear. Fear of recording devices in class is a cyclical phenomenon, reappearing every so often. While recording bans are futile, they continue to be implemented by worried professors.

The targets of thought and speech police are sometimes conservative and sometimes liberal. Although many of the most recent attacks against academic freedom have been conservative in nature, the evolution of language around diversity has itself been used at times as an instrument of exclusion, often along generational lines. Mixing up equity and equality, misunderstanding intersectionality, or even not understanding the latest practices related to capitalization could result in cancellation. In the spirit of fairness, it must be said that some gratuitous expressions of woke values by academics and administrators in past years did not reflect deep commitments but rather the same spirit of anticipatory compliance, this time fearing not government policies but student judgment. As Carel Stolker has clearly [illustrated](#), woke dogmatism has also had negative consequences. Surely it is time to abandon all efforts to police speech, whether conservative or liberal in nature, as, in all cases, the effects are detrimental for the main function of the university, which is promoting intellectual engagement, not mutual suspicion.

Striving for Meaning Through Translation

Practitioners and scholars of international higher education are gifted in the art of translation. We translate complex research findings into actionable recommendations for institutional administrators and policymakers. We often translate from one language to another, recognizing that a literal translation is not always the most accurate approach. Translation is particularly common in the Global South, where our colleagues have for decades found ways to focus on their local concerns and priorities through research while complying with the mandates of funders from Europe or the United States. Accordingly, it might be time to engage in a different kind of translation, i.e., by

adapting and embracing new terms to explain fair access, difference, and belonging in higher education. As we look for new terms, the field should not repeat past errors of dogmatism.

Diversity and fairness are central to the work of universities. Other ideals universities should remain committed to might include intellectual humility (an awareness that we could be wrong and of the limits of our own knowledge), curiosity and discovery (as opposed to dogmatism), and a plurality or

multiplicity of perspectives. Cosmopolitanism might be a good candidate for the list too, along with hospitality, as internationalization plays a central role in the mission of universities. In this issue, we have covered diversity, equity, and inclusion topics because they are central to both the study of our field and the current attacks on higher education, and also because we have much to learn from other national contexts. That is our commitment, even when the names to give these phenomena are subject to change.