



EDI Advisory Board – Session 5

Wednesday 20 May, 14:00–16:00

The Advisory Board Session took place in The Greenhouse, Devonshire House. It was attended by 10 members. The focus of the session was Freedom of Speech.

1. Welcome and Introduction

The members were welcomed to the session. The Student Voice's Campaigns and Democracy Assistant facilitated the Session. Professor Vrinda Nayak and Shraddha Chaudhary gave their apologies. Rae Preston, the Wellbeing, Inclusion and Culture Manager, attended and she introduced herself. Marcus Webb and Edie Ruston attended in their capacity as EDI Consultants.

The topic, Freedom of Speech, was introduced. A Mentimeter was conducted to get a sense check of the group's relationship with Freedom of Speech.

Mentimeter

What does Freedom of Speech mean to you?

verbal communication
true expression expression without fear
legal protection buzz word to have opinions freely
to express one self ability to criticise right to express
to raise voice being respectful open discussion
expressing opinions voice to be heard
not freedom from consequence

Mentimeter

Where do you get your information on Freedom of Speech from?

online search
not twitter it just sort of comes up
reels social media comedians
online government site protests
people around you news article news outlets
politics and ir degree the news - on reels

Board members were asked if they wanted to expand on any of the answers. The responses 'buzz word', 'legal protection', 'not freedom from consequence', and 'comedians' were discussed as a group. The conversation showered awareness about the legal status of Freedom of Speech, the recent focus on it in the media, how and where conversations about it take place.

2. Freedom of Speech Presentation

Rae Preston did a presentation on the University's duties in facilitating Free Speech. The presentation covered legal responsibilities, the University's approach, The Free Speech Code, Protests, Demonstrations, Campus Safety, and the Equality Act. Throughout the presentation students were asked if they had any questions or wanted more information, this led to conversations expanding on protest and demonstrations guidelines and where to access them; The Grainger Test (describing what constitutes 'philosophical belief' under the Equality Act); and the 'chilling' effect.

3. Break

Board members were asked to fill out the Student Volunteer Experience survey. Pizza was served.

4. Group discussions

First set of questions:

- How does Freedom of Speech impact you: in a private setting, in an academic setting, in societies?
- What are some of your concerns or worries?
- Do you feel confident to have these conversations?

Responses: In general students did not feel that Free Speech overly impacted them. 2 students mentioned how it affected them in their academic life. One of these members mentioned that they noticed that there were certain sensitive topics that they and some of their peers did not feel comfortable talking about and exercising Free Speech. A key issue raised was that Freedom of Speech has led to a rise in misinformation, which board members expressed as prevalent and challenging.

Second set of questions:

- Reflect on what is the best way for the Guild and the University to communicate about Freedom of Speech?
- Content: what would you like to know about?
- Format and channels: how would you like us to communicate about this?

Responses: Students said they wanted more transparency from the Guild and University and said they wanted a greater commitment to stopping misinformation and rumours spreading. Having separate Guild Instagram pages and mailing lists for specific issues were

suggested as ways to communicate more effectively to ensure the right information is accessible. Other suggestions included:

- Creating a culture of understanding and moving away from debate culture
- More surveys to gauge opinions and ideas
- More information on legislation on the University website
- Lectures and seminars for open discussion
- More information on Free Speech during pre-arrival and induction programs, possibly in a handbook for first-year students.

5. Tools to navigate difficult conversations

The Campaigns and Democracy Co-ordinator gave an overview of useful tools that help navigate difficult conversations around Freedom of Speech. The tools were active listening, grounding yourself in your self-interest to be able to engage with the other person's, looking for common ground, having boundaries, and the power of the pause. Resources from the British Red Cross were signposted.

Students reacted positively to these tools and expressed that they would be interested in having more information on them, or a more involved session. A student mentioned that the Bystander Training currently offered by the Guild and Academics Against Assault covered lots of the tools mentioned.

6. Overview of the Year

A brief overview of the impact the EDI Advisory Board has had over the year was given. The Board helped University of Exeter Social Sports' strategic planning by identifying areas of improvement, these included: accessibility, communication, clear participation pathways and financial inclusivity / transparency. The Board was valuable for the Success for All team, as greater insights into neurodiversity, ILPs, study skills and the Transformative Education Framework were provided. The Board has made a positive contribution to all these institutional priorities.

7. Close

Members were thanked for their participation in this session and across the year. Group pictures were taken with those who consented, and the meeting was brought to a close.