



FSU
FREE SPEECH UNION

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Professor Alec Cameron
Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive
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Dear Professor Cameron,

I am writing to you in my capacity as General Secretary of the Free Speech Union (FSU). The FSU is a non-partisan, mass-membership public interest body that stands up for the speech rights of its members and campaigns for free speech more widely.

We have been contacted by a first-year student at Aston University who is concerned about the contents of a document issued to all new students in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities entitled 'Student Guide for Undergraduate Programmes in Sociology and Policy 2021-22'. This student did not feel able to broach their concerns with the School or University directly, for fear of reprisals, and came to us to make representations on their behalf.

The guide includes an extensive section devoted to policing the language of Aston students, and includes a long list of terms that students shouldn't use. The list is extremely broad and includes terms as varied as "layman", "the deaf", "founding fathers", and "ethnic". It includes entirely non-controversial figures of speech like the "man in the street" and "layman" – which it labels as "sexist" – and supplies "non-sexist" alternatives which are often imprecise and/or significantly longer than the terms they're intended to replace. Other prohibited terms include "mentally ill", which should be replaced with "mental health service user", and "special needs", which should be replaced by "additional needs or needs".

According to the guide, the term "mixed race" is "misleading". "It should be recognised that the idea of race mixture or being 'mixed race' is informed by a racist discourse that privileges the notion of essential races," it says. This seems to penalise students who self-identify as mixed-race, or potentially other students who refer to self-described mixed-race students as such.

Confusingly, the term "native" is said to be "acceptable... if used to refer to people born in a particular place. Otherwise it has strong colonialist connotations..." But further detail about this potentially confusing point is not provided. The guide also states that "the idea of 'British' can imply a false sense of unity", seemingly suggesting that calling oneself 'British' or referring to British people as 'British' is in some way problematic.

The guidelines are not mere suggestions. The document consists of clear and unambiguous instructions:

- “Do not use ‘man’ to mean humanity in general”
- Terms which include the word “man”, the guide says, “should be replaced”

Worryingly, the guidelines state that the lengthy table of banned terms is “not intended to be an exhaustive list or a definitive guide” and “[it] must also be recognised that the meaning of these terms will be subject to revision and/or change at a faster rate than these or any other guidelines of sources may be issued”. This seems to leave students facing the risk of falling foul of this guidance by using a term whose meaning has changed since the guide itself was issued or which is retroactively deemed to be problematic.

In addition to the list of forbidden words, we are also concerned about the guide’s lack of political impartiality. Rather than describing an environment of intellectual freedom, the guide instructs students in overtly political ways, essentially prescribing and proscribing particular points of view.

For instance, the first page says: “We strongly believe that Black Lives Matter. Throughout your studies we will be addressing issues of racism and racial justice from different perspectives.” Stating that the lives of black people matter should be a non-controversial statement, albeit an unusual thing to feel the need to state on the first page of an induction guide for students. But this is clearly an expression of support for the BLM organisation and its wider ideology, as indicated by the use of upper case letters. It is the organisation being referred to in the guide, not the uncontroversial moral sentiment. It is hard to imagine how any student who reads this guide would feel free to impartially evaluate the Black Lives Matter organisation, or to say anything critical about its opposition to the police or the nuclear family.

The guide also defines the word “black” through an overtly ideological lens, rooted in Critical Race Theory: “Black is a term that embraces people who experience structural and institutional discrimination because of their skin colour and is often used politically to refer to people of African, Caribbean and South Asian origin to imply solidarity against racism... the inclusive term black refers to those who have a shared history of European colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, ethnocentrism and racism.”

We question whether it is right for the University to define an ethnic group entirely through the experience of “structural and institutional discrimination” and for the University to homogenise all black people and make a sweeping assumption about their lives, opinions and experiences. Such a view would be an entirely legitimate perspective in the context of a debate or academic discussion – and we would defend the right of any academic to express such a view. But it is not an impartial view nor one grounded in equality legislation and erases the diversity of views and perspectives within the black community. It is a definition that intentionally shuts down further discussion.

It is unfortunate that a student excited to begin their studies at Aston should instead be confronted with a patronising document that seeks to police their language and limit the range of views that you deem acceptable for students to express. Reading this document, and bearing in mind that a student felt unable to raise their concerns about it internally, suggests that there is a serious problem in the culture of the department and that students, and perhaps staff, do not feel able to freely express their views on these and other subjects.

The linguistic codes set out in this guide are both ideological and arbitrary and infringe the free speech of all students. The University should have particular regard to the experiences of international students and neuro-atypical students who may struggle to understand why in our current cultural climate terms such as

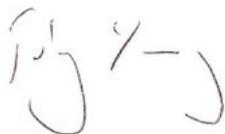
“coloured” are forbidden, but “person of colour” is acceptable, or why “native” is okay when used to refer to certain indigenous populations but not others.

As you are no doubt aware, universities have a legal duty to protect freedom of speech under section 43 (No. 2) of the 1986 Education Act. We believe that by dictating to students what language they can and cannot use and what perspectives are deemed to be admissible, the School is failing to uphold this duty. In addition, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill currently going through Parliament will significantly strengthen protections for freedom of speech and academic freedom in universities and will make it even more legally questionable to prohibit the use of commonplace words or ban mainstream views. Given that this Bill will soon become law, we find it extraordinary that Aston University should engage in such ideological thought policing.

Aston University’s own [freedom of speech policy](#) states: “The freedom to challenge conventional wisdom is an essential part of being a University, even if that process is uncomfortable for those who are being challenged.” In our view, this policy is clearly being breached by the Student Guide. It is difficult to see how students would feel empowered to challenge conventional wisdom when the Guide takes such an unapologetically doctrinal tone. Clearly, students will not feel free to challenge ‘conventional wisdom’ within the School of Social Sciences and Humanities, e.g. Critical Race Theory, when doing so is specifically proscribed by the School’s own guidance.

In light of this, we hope you will ask the School of Social Sciences and Humanities to withdraw this Guide and instead remind its students of their right to challenge conventional wisdom, within the University, including Critical Race Theory. In the meantime, we ask for your assurance that students will not have to face any investigations or suffer any adverse consequences – such as being expelled from the University – if they fail to comply with the Guide’s rules, e.g. if they use the word ‘layman’.

Yours sincerely,



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