

Trans Idea submission

Issue

Adam Tickell, newly appointed UoB Vice-Chancellor was until recently VC for the University of Sussex. While in that post, Adam Tickell threatened with disciplinary action student activists in Sussex who campaigned for the removal of Kathleen Stock, and for Sussex University to disavow her gender-critical views and her support for gender-critical institutions.

On BBC Radio 4, Tickell said, "I'm really concerned that we have masked protesters putting up posters calling for the sacking of somebody for exercising her right to articulate her views... It's absolutely clear that all of our staff have an untrammelled right to say and believe what they think, so we take it very seriously if people try to prevent that right from being exercised." He also stated the university is investigating the incidents, and would take disciplinary action if necessary [source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-58841887>].

Branding elements of the campaign as "bullying and harassment" of Stock and implicitly linking it to discrimination on the grounds of one's "philosophical beliefs", Tickell later emailed students, "The university cannot and will not tolerate discrimination based on protected characteristics, including sex and philosophical belief, and we will take action through our policies and procedures if this happens," [source: <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/10/22/adam-tickell-sussex-university-kathleen-stock/>].

While Stock did face unfortunate abuse from trolls on social media, students on campus peacefully protested for her removal – these peaceful protests, while unpleasant for Stock, did not necessarily amount to unlawful harassment.

While we stand against unlawful harassment and intimidation, Tickell's threats of disciplinary action failed to recognise students' freedom of speech, and risk intimidating student activists while asserting intimidation must never occur on university campuses.

We must establish two key principles here.

First, while we recognise the importance of freedom of speech, and acknowledge the legal framework protecting religious and philosophical beliefs, we must not condone attacks on marginalised groups, including trans people under the guise of academic freedom.

Second, we must ensure that the University never threatens any students engaged in lawful activism. This is in line with Guild Belief and Commitment 29 which states, "The Guild will do all it can to protect students engaged in activism from being subjected to violence and intimidation." We must stand against unlawful discrimination, and in doing so, recognise that, in contrast with Adam Tickell's stated position, university staff cannot always 'have an untrammelled right to say and believe what they think', when the expression of those beliefs offend and harm marginalised groups of students. In any event, students' right to lawful protest must be respected.

Solution

The Guild must issue a statement in solidarity with Trans students and Sussex activists, denouncing gender-critical views so antagonistically expressed as to harm trans and non-binary students, and demanding that the University must never threaten law-abiding students engaging in activism during Adam Tickell's vice-chancellorship at the University of Birmingham. In particular, the Vice Chancellor must be reminded that at the University of Birmingham, academic freedom and the expression of philosophical beliefs must coexist with students' right to feel safe and have their identities respected during their university careers, and that freedom of speech belongs to marginalised students just as much as academics.

The statement must also condemn Tickell and the University of Sussex's support for Kathleen Stock. We must ensure that (under Tickell's leadership) offensive speech from academics is not protected to the detriment of students' rights and freedoms at the University of Birmingham.

Finally, and most importantly, the Guild must commit to listening to Trans students and working with them on the Guild's work with the University for their benefit: letting Trans views lead Trans liberation.

Success

The Guild must issue a statement in solidarity with Trans students. We will assess the reassurance the Guild's statement provides to Trans students and activists through monitoring response on social media and through collecting feedback at the upcoming Trans Students Forum.