

# Academic Integrity, Freedom of Speech, and Student Safety

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The concept of 'academic integrity' can be applied to many aspects of educational provision, one of which could be defined loosely as the presentation of truth, or at least a range of multiple truths within an academic context. Living as we do in a post-truth world, with its bewildering array of competing narratives, allegations of 'fake news' and increasingly politicised and polemical positions, growing tensions are emerging in Higher Education between how academic integrity is felt by individual academics, how it is perceived by individual students (or indeed by communities of students), and what boundaries (if any) an academic institution can draw in facilitating the provision of competing narratives to students within its learning environment.

## Key ingredients

Many ingredients of this growing crisis are not new; academics have argued about truth since academia began, and students have always had a range of narratives presented to them which they could either reject, adopt or investigate further. Indeed, a core part of university-level teaching has always been to develop in students the skills to think critically – to examine evidence, to test arguments for bias and inaccuracy, to adopt a position of healthy suspicion when presented with received wisdom. Music performance as an academic discipline has arguably not always seen the same degree of fastidious criticality as other fields such as medicine, where the extent of engagement with the evidence base determines whether future patients – quite literally - are more likely to live or die. A music graduate, embarking on their professional career, is free to disregard all that their teachers have told them; if their artistry engages an audience, then they will be booked for performances and will be able to market their recordings etc. In other words, within the field of music performance critical understanding is demonstrably not a vital pre-requisite for a professional career.

## A new challenge arises

What *is new* in the current crisis is the legal emboldening of the right to free speech specifically within higher education, keenly felt in the United Kingdom through two recent employment tribunal outcomes – *Miller vs Bristol University* (2024), and *Corby v Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)* (2023). The former case established that anti-Zionist beliefs qualified as a protected characteristic, the latter case that an opposition to critical race theory is similarly protected by law.

These outcomes pose difficult questions for university administrations and their duty of care to student communities, not least at music conservatoires which typically have large populations of international students (my institution, for instance, has students from over sixty countries) that work together in creative music making activities. Musical collaborations depend on strong connections of mutual trust and understanding, and preparatory work to build trust is supported by institutions through the careful fostering of a culture in which

students cultivate a nuanced and respectful understanding of the other. The fostering of a mutually supportive culture has been particularly challenging during this current academic year, given conflicts in Europe and the Middle East and ongoing affects from other areas of geo-political tension; community tensions have needed sensitive handling in order to coalesce varied student groups with different life experiences and perspectives. Despite these difficulties, the act of making music has continued to provide a strong, unifying force that brings students together to forge artistic connections; the creative results are particularly authentic when students are given agency in the process, and are particularly powerful when a diverse range of students are involved.

### **The importance of recognising diversity**

From a business perspective, a music institution should follow the same logic as other businesses in terms of having a clear mission statement with defined organisational values: an identity that draws employees that will be motivated to work towards them. It should be clear to current and prospective employees what the institution stands for, and what students coming to the institution should expect to experience as the guiding educational philosophy. If this expectation is clearly established, why indeed would individuals working for the institution want to act against it? A community of academics will always be a broad church, but to what extent can an employee of a business expect to have individual views that are antithetical to the stated mission statement of the employer, and to what extent would they expect to be able to act in opposition to them? Students, as paying customers of the institution, expect a student experience that delivers the mission statement, and presumably academic staff would prefer to work at institutions where their personal views align with those of their employer.

Given that a music institution depends on a community ethos as outlined earlier, a line of tolerance can potentially be drawn depending on whether ideological differences impact on the functioning of this community. An institution needs to create an environment in which the diversity of individual students is recognised, so that students can bring their authentic selves to ensemble collaboration and generative activities such as improvisation. To create this environment, there needs to be a certain level of shared understanding of approach from the teaching staff. The presentation of competing narratives has to be carefully nuanced so as not to disrupt the sense of community, otherwise collaborative work becomes impossible and the business of the institution cannot take place.

### **The application of different models of freedom to music education**

From an emotionally detached, intellectual perspective, the debate of competing ideas in order to test different alternatives and establish the most logical position has long been a key aspect of academic practice. John Stuart Mill, for instance, warned of the pernicious effect of the 'tyranny of the majority' in preventing new ideas from coming to the fore, and identified conformity as the chief danger of his time; in music performance, which requires the development of individual creativity as well as the ability to collaborate with others, the need to test competing alternatives regularly is crucial to an exploratory training that enables each individual performer to locate and empower their authentic voice. The application of different models of freedom to music education (e.g. 'negative freedom' from Thomas Hobbes, 'positive freedom' attributed to Isaiah Berlin, the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire etc.) have led to different pedagogical and musical results. A more recent exploration by Maggie Nelson has made the case for understanding freedom through the lens of care, and this

position would seem to be most relevant to the current apparent paradox between individual and institution.

Although intellectual enquiry is a vital aspect of academia, the needs of individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences demand an educational environment that provides psychological safety as a non-negotiable pre-requisite. To students from the global majority, the discussion of critical race theory is not something that can be presented as a purely intellectual debate; as a colleague with lived experience put it, 'this subject matter is something that underpins their whole existence inside and outside of the institution and cannot be imposed as subject matter for debate within the classroom'. The same principle applies to critical discussions around gender, religion, political conflict and many other areas, depending on the lived experience that each student brings to the educational space. If an institution believes that acting with academic integrity involves building harmony and unity amongst its diverse community of students, then individual staff members need to understand that the expression of their personal academic integrity cannot involve the presentation of personally-held views that divide this community and potentially inflict trauma on some.

### **Future development**

Going forward, while institutions must provide an atmosphere of intellectual inquiry in the classroom, they will need to consider carefully how staff are trained and supported to understand the psychological needs of students that have to be met in order for meaningful dialogue on difficult issues to take place. While trigger warnings and other methods of good practice are already in use within classroom environments, the master-apprentice model of 'one-to-one' instrumental and vocal tuition used throughout music institutions is a more difficult space to manage. As management structures grapple with staff charters and codes of conduct, or how to define reasonable limits of academic discourse, the future may lead to student-led actions; recent cohorts of students have been emboldened by movements such as #MeToo, XR, BLM – they can see that direct action brings results. They are also savvy consumers, knowing that institutions rely on their tuition fees and the word-of-mouth recommendations they provide through their networks and on social media. If students choose to vote with their feet, supporting some institutions and not others, this may well be the decisive force that ultimately steers future development of this area.

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