

Audio file

Beyond the Headlines: Oxford, EDI, and What Belonging Really Means

Transcript

Alisa Brown

Hello and welcome to Oxford Student Voices, the Oxford University Students' Union podcast where we bring students and senior university leaders into open conversations about the present and the future of Oxford. I'm Alisa Brown, President for Welfare, Equity and Inclusion at Oxford SU. And today I'm joined by Tim Sopomasane. Oxford's first ever Chief Diversity Officer and Professor of Practice in Human Rights and Political Theory. Tim, thank you so much for being here. To start us off, could you quickly introduce yourself to the students who might not know you yet, and what brought you to Oxford, and what is your role as Chief Diversity Officer?

Tim Soutphommasane

Well, Alisa, thanks so much for having me on this podcast. So as Chief Diversity Officer, I lead the university's efforts on equality, diversity and inclusion, and that work extends across everything relating to students as well as to staff. I've been at the university since the start of 2023. I'm Australian, so I've come over from Australia. I was previously at the University of Sydney. I've also been a public official and was Race Discrimination Commissioner in Australia where I led national efforts in racial equality and anti-racism. And I was once a student here at Oxford myself. So I did an MPhil and DPhil some years ago in political theory. And it's wonderful to be back in Oxford. And one of the great things about being here is working with students across the collegiate university and making this place even more special than it already is.

Alisa Brown

Oh, brilliant. I did want to ask you something a bit more personal before we get to bigger themes. So both of us did our undergraduate dissertations on representation of ethnic minorities in politics, though in very different ways. So I used an API to scrape over 40,000 parliamentary questions from Hansard and a bit of statistical modelling. But once a day it was clean, the computer pretty much ran it all in minutes. From what I understand, you spent months and months going through newspapers and articles manually. Can you expand on your pre-GPT methods? And what do you think students today? with all our digital tools might be missing out on. I've heard that some PPE students don't even have dissertations. So yeah, what are your thoughts?

Tim Soutphommasane

Oh, let's see, you make me sound ancient. So I did my honours year in Sydney and then spent it writing a thesis on ethnic politics and focusing on a community in South West Sydney and looking at how the community mobilized itself politically and looking at political leadership and representation. And what you've referred to is a big part of the exercise, which was establishing historic record of how these issues were reported in local media. And that did involve me trawling through physical copies of the newspaper archive in the local area where I would sift through page after page of the local newspaper and look for mentions that related to the topic. Now I'm a pretty hands-on person, so I like the idea of touching and feeling material. And I find that I remember things better when I am writing something by hand or if I've read something on paper. So maybe I am old-fashioned and not right for the times, but I would have loved to have had the digital capability that you and other students have today to be able to process large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time. I think there's lots of positives and benefits that come from that. I think where the digital technology can sometimes be problematic is if it encourages you to take shortcuts in your thinking. So I'm a believer that you've got to adopt technology and whatever's available for you, but don't let it create shortcuts and don't let it prevent you from doing the hard work of thinking that is required to answer a complex problem.

Alisa Brown

Sure, I guess. One of the massive weaknesses of my dissertation was the fact that I couldn't actually get any sentiment like finding out of it. When I did try, we would have examples of MPs talking about rights and problems of minorities and it being framed in sort of a negative sentiment just because the words used to describe what was going on sounded negative. So there's, I guess, a pro for you to look through them manually. So anyway, the Oxford University Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan 2024-27. That sets out the vision of Oxford being a place where everybody belongs. So belonging can mean many different things in policy. But for students, it really hits home when they arrive at Freshers and they really try and find their place. So what does belonging mean to you in the Oxford context? And what can the university do to make sense of the belonging and make it feel real and students that to the students feel right at the start.

Tim Soutphommasane

Belonging is central to everything that we do on equality, diversity and inclusion, which is why we call our EDI strategic plan Everyone Belongs. And very simply, in Oxford, for students, that idea should be about the following. It's about being at home here at Oxford. It's about being comfortable in Oxford as a place where you can succeed. It's about feeling confident that you can explore your interests and explore who you are while you're a student here. All of those things is only possible if there is a condition of

you belonging and feeling like you belong here. So it's really important that students don't feel that they're on their own here, that they feel that they're part of a community. One of the great strengths of Oxford is that you've got so many different communities. So the fact that we have 39 colleges and also a number of other permanent private halls. The fact that we have more than 50 academic departments. This, we hope, should allow students to find their sense of community. And that's not to mention all of the extracurricular clubs and societies that exist. There's no one way for you to have an Oxford experience. The Oxford experience comes in multiple forms. But it is important for students to explore their interests and understand that Oxford is a place where you get out what you put in. So I think that's all part of this challenge we've got to ensure that we're a university, collegiate university that has belonging at its heart.

Alisa Brown

So Oxford has launched big initiatives like Opportunity Oxford, Dash Aphoria Foundation Year, Academic Futures to widen access. And when we talk about EDI here, It's not about just the 9 predicted characteristics in the Equality Act. It's also about making sure students from disadvantaged or unrepresented backgrounds, whether it's due of class, care leaver status, or being their first in the family to go to university, have the chance when they get here to thrive. So what is the difference? What difference actually are these programmes making so far? And do you see them evolving in any way?

Tim Soutphommasane

Well, I think they're making a big difference. At least that's what students who've been on them are telling us and are sharing with us. They're still relatively young. So when you put it in the big scheme of things, these programs have only been running for a relatively short number of years. So they will evolve, they will grow, they will mature. But when it comes to what it gives students, I think it gives students a number of things. One is just some very direct and practical support to ensure that they feel that they can belong. Here in Oxford, they arrive, ensuring that they have a network of peers and fellow students that they can turn to and share their experiences with, in addition to the other networks that exist. This is important, I think, allowing students to build relationships with fellow students. And the main thrust of these programs is to help give some context to the Oxford experience. You can think of being a student at Oxford as just being about your teaching or about what you're taught and learning in the tutorials or the seminar rooms or the classroom settings. what these programs do is help ensure that those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds get support on the student experience more broadly. And I think, you did frame this at the start as being about EDI. There are some nuances in this because this work is often described within Oxford in terms of access and participation, which is slightly different. language, but there are obvious connections between access and participation and equality, diversity

and inclusion. And I just note that because within Oxford, there can be a distinction drawn, but I know that in the outside world, when people look into what we do, they very rarely make a distinction between EDI and access and participation, which only just underlines the important overlap you have between those two things.

Alisa Brown

Okay, yeah. Moving on to graduates, A. So the Quality, Diversity and Inclusion EDI Annual Report 2023-24 highlights graduate access and career progression as one of Oxford's ongoing challenges. From your perspective as Chief Diversity Officer, how does your office work with divisions and departments to address those barriers in postgraduate pipeline?

Tim Soutphommasane

I work very closely with all of our colleagues across divisions and academic departments and also in our colleges. And that's a big part of my role to try and coordinate and bring together all of the fantastic work that happens at a local level and make sure that it has broader cumulative institutional impact. I mean, a few things just to tease out here. There's work that we do on graduate access and recruitment. New strategy has just been launched. On that and on the graduate student front, we've been doing work in partnership with Cambridge on some of this through Target Oxbridge, which is designed to ensure that we see more graduates from black backgrounds in particular. So that's an example of the work we're doing there. But when we talk about career progression, though, much of the work around career progression is staff focused. So it's about ensuring that the academics and researchers who come to us in their early career stages are supported to have opportunities to remain in Oxford or to develop their careers and proceed, for example, from being postdoctoral fellows or lecturers into posts as associate professors and tutorial fellows, which is the standard academic post. So we have set targets for BME and women professors and associate professors, that's included in our strategic plan, but they're all of a piece. If you want to have more academics from underrepresented backgrounds, you can only get there if you have the pipeline. You need students to finish their undergraduate degrees, then go into graduate study, and then go into academic career routes. And obviously not everyone who goes through the university here as an undergraduate will go on to do graduate studies. So there is a challenge there to ensure that we're making conscious efforts to build a pipeline so that when we talk about the representation of academics in the university environment, we have the pipeline to support that.

Alisa Brown

I kind of want to rewind then and look at sort of this early pipeline. I know the university has acknowledged persistent awarding gaps for black students in particular. And that is actually something I ran to combat in my election manifesto. So what concrete steps

are being taken to close these gaps? And how will students be able to see and feel the impact of that work?

Tim Soutphommasane

So this is a real priority for us and in what's done is the access and participation. plan, we have set a very clear target, which is that we want 94% of black students undergraduate to get a good degree. So that's a 2.1 or above. So that's the aspiration. And there are a number of things that we're focusing on. One is around the student experience, ensuring that we are partnering with students to understand how they're experiencing their studies and their life here. And it goes back to what I was saying earlier about this not just being about the classroom or about academics, but about a student experience more broadly. Because how you feel about your place in Oxford will have some bearing and effect on how you perform academically. And we know that there can be a challenge with some students feeling that they may not belong or they can be uncomfortable. And we want to create the right environment to ensure that every student here has an equal chance to succeed. So there's a student experience element, but then there is the element around teaching and learning. So we are doing work through colleagues in the Centre for Teaching and Learning and across different departments and divisions around how we diversify our curriculum and how we conduct more inclusive teaching. So these are areas where we know change or improvements can make an enormous difference to students and colleagues in the GLAM part of the universities. So this is gardens, libraries and museums, but particularly the Bodleian Library. I know we're looking into ensuring that there's more diverse representation within our library collections and within our library spaces because again, it comes down to that feeling of belonging and we want all students to feel that they are welcomed and belonged in our spaces, including our libraries. And then on top of that, I know that in recent years we've made a conscious effort to diversify some elements within our student service provision. So in particular, the counselling service and having more counsellors from black backgrounds and more people of colour within the staffing for the counselling service. So if you look at all of these things taken together in the round, I hope that you can see that we're trying really hard to make sure that the student experience for black students here is as welcoming as possible.

Alisa Brown

Okay, so I can see what you're doing, like within the university, the APP, and within your staff body. But nationally, when external factors come into this, so recently, criticism of 1 student was amplified in national media. and that resulted in other Oxford students from minority backgrounds who were not directly involved and they became targets of racial slurs, death rates and online abuse. There was a vote narrative that ethnic minorities are EDI hires and that they didn't really deserve their place here at Oxford. So

what does Oxford consider? So does Oxford consider race? when offering spaces to prospective students, firstly? And secondly, what should the university be doing to challenge that dangerous narrative?

Tim Soutphommasane

Yeah, I mean, very concerning that some of our students have experienced harassment or hatred directed their way. So there's no place for that. And we want to ensure that the university is an inclusive and walking place for everyone. But as you've alluded to, there are things that happen outside the university. world in media or in public debate that unfortunately we can't control or we can't shape in ways that we would necessarily like. So that is a challenge. But to your question around admissions, our admissions have a very clear process behind them. Our admissions are based on merit and academic potential. And if we're talking about ethnicity or race, even with the collection of ethnicity data, UCAS is the body that collects that data, university does not see that until after the admissions process concludes. So that's one element of how we conduct admissions that isn't always clearly understood. We take a very rigorous and holistic approach to how we do admissions. So we'll consider, for example, with respect to undergraduate admissions, A-level grades and predicted grades, but we'll consider this alongside other evidence of merit and academic potential. Things like interviews. We'll consider references as well. In many subjects, you will be sitting a test prior to being admitted, and there will be consideration too to context and to students' experiences, but we don't explicitly or specially consider race or ethnicity in how we conduct admissions here.

Alisa Brown

Interesting. So kind of going off this topic of free speech and some of the repercussions that happened there. That kind of raises the question as to how we handle views that are lawful but deeply contested. What does Oxford need to do to strike that right balance and making sure at the same time students are feeling safe, respected and yeah, while also ensuring that free expression is properly protected.

Tim Soutphommasane

Alyssa, I think striking a balance is exactly the right way to approach this, because if we're thinking about these matters, you have freedom of speech and academic freedom, and these are freedoms that we're deeply committed to as a university, but people also enjoy freedom from discrimination. And that's another freedom too. So the freedom to say things does not mean that there are no limits to what you can say. Our stance as a university is that we will permit all speech that is lawfully expressed. So we believe that any views which members of our community believe are relevant should be given the fair chance of a hearing. We also believe, though, that contentious views should be exposed to questioning, criticism and scrutiny. So we expect students and

staff here at the university to anticipate that they will encounter views with which they may disagree. But provided that it is done within the law, we believe that views should be given a fair hearing. Now, none of this excuses things such as harassment or discrimination or threats. So we draw a very clear line between debating ideas and doing things which may threaten, discriminate against or harass others. And this is something that we communicate very clearly to students and to staff, but we certainly believe that a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion can, should and must go hand in hand with a commitment to freedom of speech. There's no choice here between these two things. A university is a place where you can have both of these commitments, but it does call upon us to think about how we respect others. It demands that we are kind and generous to others and it requires us to lead by example in showing how we have to be a pluralistic community where we admit a range of views and may have civil disagreements about important matters.

Alisa Brown

Wow, I feel we're running out of time and I feel like you've sort of answered this a little bit, but going back another step, Despite increasing media criticism that frames EDI as divisive, public support for it still remains. The recent Oxford co-led study, Finding Common Ground on EDI, found that 56% of Britons want institutions to either maintain or increase their focus on EDI, with the strongest support when it's tied to the fairness in jobs and opportunities and things that really matter in people's lives. So just trying to focus on the students here, What is Oxford doing to maintain those connections right now between EDI and students' futures in careers, opportunity and life beyond university?

Tim Soutphommasane

Well, the university's job is to equip our students not just for future work and for their careers, but also how they participate in life more generally as citizens and as people, as individuals. We hope that the work that we do equips students with the skills to be able to deal with difference, to be able to navigate disagreements, and to be able to build meaningful relationships with others. But in all of this, we do our work on EDI as a university. So all of this is about how we conduct our teaching, our research, and how we advance learning and knowledge. But we are informed by research, as you'd expect, and the research you've mentioned is work that we have been doing with UCL Policy Lab and More in Common. And it just shows that there is significant goodwill and support within the British public for EDI. There's limited appetite for there to be a rollback or repeal of EDI in the manner that the United States has been pursuing. So in this year's research, we found that 52% of Britons believe that EDI is a good thing versus 14% who believe it's a bad thing. Now that does reflect a bit of a shift from last year. So last year we found that 62% believed EDI is a good thing with 12% believing it's a bad thing. So what you're seeing is the effect of the very vocal debates that you have on

diversity, shifting some of those who were previously supportive, very supportive of EDI into a camp where they may have a more neutral view on EDI. So this is why we believe it's important to frame our work very precisely. And as a university, this is about ensuring our academic excellence and creating the conditions for that. And in terms of the values that we pursue, EDI is fundamentally about respect and about equal opportunity. And it is aligned to with our commitment to pluralism, free speech and the pursuit of knowledge. So that's why we return to those principles very often because there can be a perception among some segments or sectors of British society that EDI is what is called DEI in America. But they're very different things. The work we do emerges out of the duties that we have under the Equality Act, which is the law on equality and anti-discrimination in the UK. We use different language, we have a different legal framework. So we've got to be clearer about what this work is about and about the common ground that exists in terms of the support for efforts to improve equality of opportunity.

Alisa Brown

Tim, well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. I'm really, really looking forward to the year ahead of working with you. And I know we'll be seeing a lot of each other at the Joint Committee for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, where I'll be representing students as part of the university's senior decision making on these issues. So to any students listening that have experienced racial abuse, been affected by a recent event and are unsure where to go to for help, Oxford SU offers free and impartial advice, so you can reach us by e-mail at advice@oxfordsu.ox.ac.uk or visit us on the website to find out more about support services available to you. Thank you for joining us on Oxford Student Voices and till next time, let's all keep working together to make Oxford a more inclusive place.