**Academic Freedom and Netflix’s ‘The Chair’: Implications for Staff-Student Dialogue**

Abstract

Academic freedom is seriously under threat. Here I will consider how the marketisation of Higher Education has exacerbated the decline of ‘academic freedom’. While the effects of a ‘cancel culture’ on university provision are difficult to ignore, threats to academic freedom raise a number of questions, such as: ‘who is allowed to speak on campus?’, ‘to whom?’, and ‘about what?’. These questions are fundamental to the academic profession, and therefore have clear implications for teaching and learning in Higher Education. Through an analysis of Netflix’s *The Chair* (2021), and drawing on the works of Martin Buber, I argue that academics’ freedom to teach is implicitly constrained by student-consumer desires, and in turn this reduces the space for genuine dialogue on university campuses. Rather than closing down debate and the discussion of ‘controversial’ topics, universities instead need to cultivate a climate of trust, openness, and reciprocity on campuses, such that genuine staff-student dialogue can flourish. University campuses are precisely the places where academics should be able to engage in scholarly debate on matters of importance – where students may be exposed to radically different viewpoints and perspectives – and film and TV series can be used to initiate such conversations.

Keywords: academic freedom; freedom to teach; student consumerism; dialogue.

**Introduction: Defining ‘Academic Freedom’**

Imagine this scene: a university professor makes an inappropriate gesture while introducing the topic of national socialism and the Holocaust, students record this on their phones and share the video clip widely, then a series of student protests take place, calling for the professor involved to be sacked.

Now imagine a less controversial scene: a white male professor, perhaps beyond ‘retirement age’, is threatened with redundancy unless he can make his module more appealing to students and increase the number of enrolments; this professor then teams up with a younger academic to reinvigorate his pedagogy, although the extent to which he does change and become more ‘student-centred’ is debatable.

Both of these scenes are featured in a recent Netflix series, *The Chair* (2021). The series focuses on a recently appointed chair - the first Asian woman to take up such a position, played by Sandra Oh - of the English department at a research-intensive American university. As one moves through the episodes, we see Prof. Ji-Yoon Kim (Sandra Oh) face numerous obstacles in seeking to improve the ‘health of the department’, including institutional budget cuts, student recruitment and satisfaction concerns, and a team of unruly, dissenting colleagues to manage. Although the prestigious ‘Pembroke College’ is fictional, nonetheless the issues presented in *The Chair* are unfortunately all too relatable. In the UK context specifically, efforts to recruit and retain students, as well as ensuring high levels of employability after graduation are now a matter of survival or extinction in a competitive marketplace.

While the series has been described as a ‘dramedy’, I argue that this does not do justice to the ways in which *The Chair* addresses issues of racial inequality, academic freedom, power relations between those with and without tenure, and the pressures of marketisation in Higher Education, sensitively and from a variety of perspectives. Here, I will focus on the complex interplay of academic freedom and marketisation, drawing specifically on the scenes presented above, to discuss the educational implications of restricting speech on campus.

Academic freedom has received increasing attention in the past few years, particularly in the US context, as debates over ‘no-platforming’ for certain ideologies have gained prominence. Whilst academic freedom is simultaneously described as both a ‘right’ and a ‘responsibility’ (Tierney and Lechuga, 2005; Palfreyman, 2007; Gibbs, 2016), and it is often appealed to in terms of free speech, there is in fact no unified, objective definition of the concept that stands up to scrutiny (Titus, 2011; Matei, 2019). As highlighted by Sultana (2018, p.233), there may be a ‘false equivalence’ between ‘academic freedom’ and ‘free speech’ as they are often incorrectly seen as interchangeable terms. But while freedom of speech in general may be prompted by any number of intentions, both positive and negative, academic freedom – and the expression of one’s views as an academic – is generally motivated by pedagogical concerns. Academic freedom also has to meet a higher standard of rigour and accuracy than mere free speech, as the overall goal is to present a reasoned argument. As Sultana puts it:

Academic freedom is not about spreading random ideas or opinions, but about the pursuit of truth, the construction and dissemination of knowledge that is clearly grounded in academic scholarship, and which meets a basic level of intellectual rigor (2018, p.232).

While ‘academic freedom’ is undoubtedly a complex, multi-faceted concept which is difficult to pin down, there is some agreement on categorising it in terms of the ‘freedom to teach’ and ‘freedom to research’ (Palfreyman, 2007; Saini, 2020; Karran *et al.*, 2021). Academics’ ‘freedom to teach’ is often discussed in very practical terms, such as having the freedom to determine course content, pedagogical approach, and assessment methods without interference. As stated by the American Association for University Professors (AAUP, 1940), an academics’ freedom to teach should allow for the discussion of controversial matters, but only if this is related to the subject.

Meanwhile, the ‘freedom to research’ seems to depend on the particularities of an institution’s culture, whether this is one of ‘free speech’, or instead a culture of self-constraint and repression. The freedom to research any topic of scholarly interest and to publish the results (even if these might challenge pre-existing beliefs or address controversial issues) may be formally protected within universities, but yet there are still likely to be implicit assumptions made about what counts as ‘good’ research within any institution. These assumptions about good or ‘worthwhile’ research are reflected in the widespread preference for quantitative over qualitative data, and the marginalisation of non-empirical forms of research across many disciplines in academia.

While my focus here is on academic freedom in relation to the HE classroom, it is interesting to note that the AAUP also discuss academics’ ‘extramural utterances’ outside the workplace. As AAUP explains, academics should have free expression as citizens beyond their institutions, and as such they should not be censored or punished for their views. Although this freedom of ‘extramural utterance’ is seemingly protected and defended by the AAUP principles, there is an added caveat that the academic profession may still be judged based on individuals’ views, and so it must be made explicit that each academic does not speak on behalf of their institution. Reichman highlights that academics’ free speech outside the university is still a grey area of insecurity and repression, as academics could still be disciplined for their personal views if their speech is thought to affect their ‘fitness’ for the profession (2019, p.57), and ‘fitness’ is yet another slippery concept in this debate.

Although academics’ own views (and extramural utterances) are very likely to influence their pedagogy, this is regarded as unproblematic provided that the discussion of controversial topics does not interfere with the university’s mission of working towards ‘the common good’, broadly construed (Reichman, 2019). This idea of the ‘common good’ should underpin the discussion of ‘academic freedom’ as the right to teach and research in Higher Education does have an indirect (or more direct in terms of ‘impact case studies’), positive influence on society as a whole. In the next section, I will explore the relationship between academic freedom and student consumerism, drawing on recent campus protests and debates to exemplify how academic freedom is currently under threat in the UK context.

**Freedom to teach and freedom to research**

Both the ‘freedom to teach’ and ‘freedom to research’ are intrinsically connected and tied to the academic job role, but here I will focus more on the ‘freedom to teach’ as it has been increasingly questioned in response to recent campus protests and events in the UK.[[1]](#footnote-1) While the threats to academic freedom in countries such as the USA and the UK are perhaps more subtle than elsewhere (Altbach, 2001; Kinzelbach *et al*., 2021, 2022), it is nonetheless concerning. Protection for academic freedom is seen as being at a low level across the UK, with academics noting a significant decline recently, and this is more of a stark decline when compared to EU countries (Karran *et al*., 2021). Even within the UK context, there are variations in the level of protection of academic freedom according to one’s institution, with the Russell group seen as having ‘stronger’ protections than in post-1992 universities. An interesting aside to this pattern of rights and protections is that the perceived level of protection of academic freedom was also positively related to the institution’s ‘World Rankings’ position (Karran and Mallinson, 2018). While there may be international differences in the level of academic freedom which is allowable and protected, relative to the ideals and constraints of each political climate (Altbach, 2001; Kinzelbach *et al.*, 2021, 2022),[[2]](#footnote-2) this can also vary according to one’s specific contract, whether it is ‘academic’, ‘teaching only’, and/or on a fixed-term or sessional basis (Rea, 2021). As Rea explains, those who are employed on a more temporary basis might be particularly wary of repercussions and feel the need to ‘keep their heads below the parapet’ (Rea, 2021, p.28).

The ‘freedom to teach’ is directly affected by the rise of student consumerism in Higher Education, as *what* academics teach and *how* they approach it is increasingly shaped by student-consumer feedback and satisfaction ratings. Indeed, Hayes (2021) has identified that universities’ increased focus on ‘the student experience’, marketisation, and the National Student Survey (NSS, a widely used measure of student satisfaction across UK universities) are all direct threats to academic freedom. As HE has become successively marketised in the UK, with students and their families bearing more of the financial burden of university study, this has increased the level of student expectations and cemented their status as ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’ of HE services. In a HE marketplace which is increasingly international, there is fierce competition for students along the lines of a ‘bums on seats’ mentality. Once students are enrolled, universities are then also under pressure to ensure good retention and completion rates. Universities are now almost duty-bound to actively respond to student satisfaction ratings and other forms of feedback as a way of protecting their institutional reputation and/or maintaining their league table position.

The emphasis placed on pre-empting and ensuring student satisfaction has another interesting effect on university provision; student-consumers are now encouraged to be more actively involved in curriculum development and innovation. Often, this may mean that student feedback is simply used to inform future changes to course content and pedagogy in a unidirectional, reactive process. There is also a growing body of literature discussing the benefits of engaging students as ‘pedagogical consultants’, ‘partners’, and even ‘co-producers’ in the learning process. This shift is not only about students becoming active in their own learning, but also involving students in curricular decision-making.

With greater student involvement in university processes, it may be increasingly difficult for institutions and individual academics to account for the wide variety of perspectives on ‘controversial’ issues, such that the avoidance of topics like ‘trans rights’ or ‘the legacy of British colonialism’ becomes the least troublesome option. One may be left wondering, what topics are permissible to discuss on university campuses, and how should staff-student differences of opinion on ‘controversial’ topics be dealt with? While some activists argue that there should be ‘no debate’ on issues such as trans rights, Suissa and Sullivan argue that there are educational ‘costs’ involved when such discussions are curtailed (2021, p.55), and ultimately this impacts the functioning of a democratic society. Although trans rights and recognition is a particularly emotive discussion, if this and other potentially sensitive topics cannot be discussed in Higher Education, then this may constrain both academics’ freedom to research and their freedom to teach. The influence of student-consumers on what may be taught versus what should not be discussed on campus is implicit, but also potentially insidious.

As Titus highlights, student ratings of academics’ teaching on the one hand, and issues concerning academic freedom on the other, have largely been treated as separate topics. But there is an inevitable connection between student-consumerism and academic freedom as ‘within a marketplace academy, student ratings of faculty contribute to a shift of pedagogical authority from the professoriate to “student consumers”, and place the academic freedom of faculty at risk’ (Titus, 2011, p.108). If ‘tenure’ is the structure which formally protects academic staff from sanctions related to the pursuit of truth in their teaching and research (Stancato, 2000) - which may involve controversial topics - then the picture is even more worrying when we acknowledge that tenure is now seen as somewhat of a mythical unicorn (Skea, 2021).

Student satisfaction ratings and/or the potential threat of student complaints now seems to have a pre-emptive effect on academics’ freedom to teach, such that they may seek to avoid any uncomfortable or ‘controversial’ topics altogether, instead feeling the need to ‘settle students down’ (Skea, 2017). This is evidenced in the widespread attention now devoted to the idea of developing ‘safe spaces’ on university campuses, which may involve creating physically separate spaces, but more often the emphasis is placed on ideological ‘safety’ and/or neutrality (Byron, 2017).

Talk of ‘safe spaces’ in the literature is also inextricably linked to the debate over the necessity of ‘trigger warnings’[[3]](#footnote-3) across the HE curriculum. While the debate over trigger warnings in HE is extremely divisive, there are concerns specific to academic freedom as the impetus to provide trigger warnings for content that students might find upsetting could potentially lead to increased self-censorship (Wyatt, 2016), as no one wants to fall foul of attending to students’ needs and expectations. Although some topics may be more ‘controversial’ or ‘sensitive’ by their very nature (e.g. the discussion of ‘White privilege’), it could be difficult to anticipate, and thus to manage, what might ‘trigger’ students in a specific classroom context. All of these subtle changes to the campus climate have resulted in a closing down of dialogue and debate in HE, and in turn there is an ongoing fracturing of the ‘we’ which underpins genuine dialogue between staff and students.

Having discussed how student satisfaction and consumerism are inextricably tied to academic freedom, I will now move on to explain the pertinence of the two scenes taken from *The Chair* to current debates over academics’ ‘freedom to teach’ in the contemporary university.

**Freedom to teach and student consumerism in *The Chair***

The recent Netflix series *The Chair* (2021) has been met with many different responses, with some arguing that the depiction of academia is unrealistic (Morse, 2021), and others suggesting it is in fact all too real and is eerily representative of university life (Tongson, 2021; Yuen, 2021). While the series is fictional and does not claim to be representative of ordinary academic life, it does astutely highlight the inherent complexities of navigating one’s teaching and research commitments within a marketised system, and in a ‘post-truth’ era.

Prof. Kim starts off her first staff meeting as Chair by explaining the department’s rather unfavourable position, and as she puts it:

We are in dire crisis. Enrolments are down more than 30%. Our budget is being gutted…in these unprecedented times, we have to prove that what we do in the classroom – modelling critical thinking, stressing the value of empathy – is more important than ever, and has value to the public good.

There are a number of ideas worth unpacking here. First, individual academics and departmental teams now increasingly bear the responsibility for student numbers and recruitment. If enrolments are down, the unspoken implication of this is ultimately the threat of losing one’s position depending on the number of ‘bums on seats’.

Second, the idea that universities, and specific departments such as English which may not be as highly valued in the job market – Ji-Yoon makes a distinction between English and Computer Science in this respect – have to constantly prove their worth is jarring. Although accountability measures and performance management are now widespread throughout different sectors, and as such perhaps we cannot suggest that Higher Education should be immune to this, the surveillance culture this entails is anathema to academic freedom.

Returning to the first scene outlined above, the professor involved, Bill Dobson, seems to be on a downward spiral before this incident. The audience often sees Bill in a drunken state, turning up to his teaching sessions late and unprepared. This in itself is troubling, and in real life Bill’s behaviour would likely be reflected in poor student evaluations of his teaching, in turn leading to a performance review with his line manager. When making a distinction between fascism and absurdism in his module ‘Death and Modernism’, Bill inappropriately says ‘Heil Hitler’ and makes the Nazi salute gesture. Once this is recorded by his students and shared widely, there are numerous student protests on campus urging the university to terminate Bill’s employment. Ji-Yoon and other academic managers encourage Bill to publicly apologise, but he defends his position and the matter is subject to a disciplinary hearing. Bill tries to explain himself to the student protesters, but rather than this prompting genuine staff-student dialogue on a difficult issue, instead this only seems to further inflame the situation. At the meeting to decide Bill’s fate, his dismissal and ban from campus seems to be a foregone conclusion before he is even allowed to speak.

While I am not condoning the behaviour of Bill Dobson at all, it does raise some unfortunate questions, such as: what are we allowed to discuss on campus? and; are there any topics which we should avoid altogether? The way in which Dobson’s university responds to the students’ concerns is also worryingly realistic, as threats to an institution’s reputation must be dealt with quickly if they are not to have a lasting effect on future student recruitment. Even if a university does publicly support their academic staff in a ‘freedom of speech’ debate, such as Kathleen Stock’s recent case at Sussex University, this may not be sufficient to ensure academics’ freedom and protection, including their personal safety on campus. Student consumerism can exacerbate the difficulties around academic freedom debates and protests, as a sense of entitlement is almost implied in the ‘consumer’ role itself (Bates and Kaye, 2014; Nixon *et al.*, 2018). Those arguing for Stock’s dismissal from Sussex have even directly referred to their high tuition fees as a way of explaining their actions, and as one student puts it: ‘it’s a case of students who pay more than £9,000 per year to feel safe and free to be themselves when they walk onto campus’ (Andersson, 2021). While I understand the student protesters’ position on this, my concern is that the severity of the protests and threats to Stock’s safety have merely reinforced an unhelpful distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (student-consumers versus academics), and in turn this closes down the space for genuine dialogue on campus.

Although the second scene outlined above may seem less ‘controversial’ and politically complex, the influence of students on course content and pedagogy is nevertheless felt. The professor in question, Elliot Rentz, must make his modules more attractive and increase the number of student enrolments he has or there is a risk of enforced retirement/redundancy. Rentz’s position of established authority and tenure is in stark contrast to that of Prof. Yaz McKay, who is at an earlier stage in her career yet much more popular with students. When they disagree over Yaz’s teaching methods and her application for tenure, the conversation turns to student numbers:

Yaz: You’re lecturing to an empty hall!

Elliot: Because I don’t pander to my students.

Yaz: Nobody wants what you’re selling.

Elliot: I’m not a salesman.

Here, the logic of the market rears its head in shaping academics’ freedom to teach. Of course, there should be some balance between what academics themselves want to focus on, and what students want to learn, but the emphasis placed on student satisfaction and recruitment seems to imply that student-consumers should get exactly what they want, nothing more and nothing less. While *The Chair* does perhaps reinforce a number of simplistic stereotypes, such as the portrayal of ‘older’ professors as technophobes who are resistant to student consumerism, it does also highlight the tensions involved when academic freedom is in conflict with students’ desires.

While Bill Dobson’s case serves as a more extreme example of students’ influence over curricular matters and campus culture, the conflation of teaching quality (and thus, the value of that particular academic member of staff) with student numbers in Rentz’s case is also concerning. The persistent racial and gender inequalities in academia are still in need of urgent redress, and *The Chair* similarly highlights these tensions on campus, but my focus here is on the specific interplay of academics’ freedom to teach and the student satisfaction agenda. In the next section, I will discuss how threats to academic freedom are not only relevant to academics themselves, but this may also affect the quality of staff-student dialogue on campus.

**Academic freedom and staff-student dialogue**

The examples taken from *The Chair*, and the real-life case of student protests against Kathleen Stock, have served as a heuristic to discuss the ways in which academic freedom – and specifically the ‘freedom to teach’ – is currently under threat. Although Dobson’s case is couched in terms of a ‘dramedy’ and thus could be seen as somewhat unrealistic, the backlash against Stock sounds like a dramatic fiction rather than a real instance of ‘academic versus student freedom’ on campus. While threats to academic freedom are inherently problematic, this should not only be a concern for individual academics but also for students themselves who may now only be able to access a narrow, employability-focused form of Higher Education. The closing down of debates on important issues constitutes a severe threat to Higher Education in its richest sense; if genuine dialogue and debate is constrained on university campuses, then the idea of promoting students’ self-cultivation or *Bildung* could become meaningless.

If constraints are implicitly placed on academics’ freedom to teach, such that their judgment over pedagogy and course content is called into question, then this could limit teaching to that which is merely aligned with student-consumer desires. While students’ involvement in curricular decision-making should be encouraged to a certain extent, when this starts to constrain academics’ freedom to teach, then there is a need to acknowledge the corrosive effect of this power dynamic on staff-student dialogue. Although academic freedom is inevitably shaped by wider social, political, and economic forces – and thus constraints on the ‘freedom to teach’ cannot be fully addressed without an accompanying shift away from global competitiveness and neoliberalism – here I am focusing on staff-student dialogue as an ordinary, everyday expression of these pressures. While broader systemic change to the current HE system may be necessary, my concern is with how individual academics can reclaim the classroom as a space for the discussion of difficult and potentially ‘controversial’ matters. Given that the influence of student consumerism on academics’ ‘freedom to teach’ is subtle and nuanced, and academic freedom is still at a relatively high level in the UK and the USA compared to other countries (Kinzelbach *et al.*, 2022), it seems appropriate to focus on this issue from the ‘ground up’ rather than at the level of policy-making.

I will draw on the works of Martin Buber here to discuss the significance of dialogue in Higher Education, in turn showing the connection between dialogue and different kinds of interpersonal relations. Although Buber did not write extensively about education, his work has been used to analyse teacher-student relationships in schools, colleges, and universities alike (Blenkinsop, 2006; Guilherme and Morgan, 2009; Shady and Larson, 2010; Wegerif and Major, 2019), while his distinction between various forms of dialogue has been related to student tutorials in HE specifically (Fulford, 2013). Martin Buber argues that there are three different forms of dialogue: genuine dialogue, technical dialogue, and monologue disguised as dialogue. Genuine dialogue, which may be increasingly difficult to detect on university campuses, is characterised by an openness and reciprocity towards the other person that one is faced with in conversation. The intention which guides genuine dialogue is to establish a ‘living mutual relation between himself [oneself] and them [one’s interlocutor]’ (Buber, 1947/2002, loc.590). Genuine dialogue can be separated out from the other, more truncated forms of dialogue as it is distinctly other-oriented, rather than being motivated by a concern for oneself and one’s own needs. While all three forms of dialogue are constitutive of living in communion with others, it is my contention that only genuine dialogue can be educative.

Technical dialogue is more instrumental, and is ‘prompted solely by the need of objective understanding’ (Buber, 1947/2002, loc.590). Each interlocutor in a technical dialogue is more concerned with the content of what is said, rather than with coming to know the other person. Technical dialogue does not involve any sense of ‘turning toward’ the other, but it is useful in certain situations, such as when Prof. Kim must explain the ‘rules’ of the disciplinary meeting to Bill Dobson. ‘Monologue disguised as dialogue’, on the other hand, is both more pervasive and pernicious. This form of ‘dialogue’ mimics real communication between those involved, yet each person is really only confined to their own interests, and it could be more accurately described as a kind of ‘talking past’ one another. Monologue disguised as dialogue is not motivated by the need to connect with others and/or convey something to them, but instead it is prompted by a ‘desire to have one’s own self-reliance confirmed by marking the impression that is made’ (Buber, 1947/2002, loc.608). This inauthentic form of ‘dialogue’ is aptly demonstrated in the pedagogical approach of Elliot Rentz in *The Chair*, as well as in the conversations between Prof. Kim and the faculty dean. The ‘dialogue’ between Ji-Yoon and Dean Larson is frustrating on a number of occasions, as there is an assumption that Ji-Yoon will have more of a voice in shaping university procedures now that she is the chair, but instead what transpires between them could be described as a ‘faceless spectre of dialogue’ (Buber, 1947/2002, loc.608).

In the scenes discussed above, the distinct lack of dialogue shown between staff and students is representative of the campus relations depicted throughout the Netflix series. On the few occasions where staff and students do engage in dialogue, particularly with Bill’s PhD student Lila, there is a sense of ‘management’ of student expectations and a concern with institutional reputation is almost tangible. When the student protests against Bill Dobson gain traction and media attention, Ji-Yoon advises Lila not to say anything about the incident if she is approached by journalists; this is perhaps unfairly characterised as a ‘gag order’, but it is an example of mere technical dialogue.

While Bill’s initial gaffe could be considered as an instance of technical dialogue, his attempt to rectify the situation by encouraging students to debate the issue of inclusion/exclusion of Nazism and national socialism in the HE curriculum, could constitute a ‘sign of address’ which is instead a marker of genuine dialogue (Buber, 1947/2002, loc.167). It seems as if Bill is turning toward the students and is open to ‘experiencing the other side’ of the conversation (Buber, 1947/2002, loc.159), which is the students’ position as protesters and consumers, however this attempt at exchange is not received positively. Instead, the students express a cynicism which highlights that the opportunities for genuine dialogue may only occur on the academic’s terms, i.e., when there is a need to address each student in their particularity, rather than seeing them as a homogenous group.

Although Dobson’s case is fictional and represents a very exaggerated instance of ‘cancel culture’, it does raise the issue of academic freedom in a way which highlights perhaps what *not* to do when dealing with controversial topics in the HE classroom. While technical dialogue and ‘monologue disguised as dialogue’ both have their place on university campuses, I argue that it is only genuine dialogue which has the potential to generate constructive conversations on difficult and/or controversial topics.

When introducing issues such as climate change, trans rights, or the legacy of the British empire in the classroom, the environment must necessarily be one of openness and trust, rather than a culture of surveillance and self-constraint. Developing a classroom climate of trust and reciprocity may arguably be more difficult now as universities are embedded in a ‘measurement culture’ (Biesta, 2009) which is antithetical is to these values. In order for genuine staff-student dialogue to flourish, there is a significant need to ‘democratise’ the HE classroom, with staff and students to be repositioned as ‘co-inquirers’, rather than ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ of knowledge respectively.

A key way to ‘democratise’ the university classroom could be to acknowledge one’s own doubts, and that the academic as ‘knowledge producer’ does not necessarily have all the answers. There is a delicate balance to be had between showing the students that you are knowledgeable within your subject, but also pointing out where there are ongoing debates and unresolved issues in a particular discipline. An example of this could be discussing developmental disorders and inclusion using the traditional language of psychology, whilst also highlighting that any reference to ‘disorders’, ‘impairments’, and ‘mental retardation’ is inherently problematic. While the discussion of developmental disorders such as Autism and ADHD might not seem to be ‘controversial’ at face value, I did clearly preface the issue of problematic language in psychology from the outset in teaching sessions on this topic, and this encouraged further debate and greater critical reflection among the students.

A classroom climate of openness which is conducive to genuine dialogue may only be cultivated when staff and students recognise each other as a ‘Thou’ rather than an ‘It’. According to Buber, there are two distinct realms of human experience: (i) ‘I-Thou’ relations, and; (ii) ‘I-It’ interactions. As with the three forms of dialogue already discussed, both *I-It* and *I-Thou* exchanges are necessary to communal life, however the *I-It* relation is limited in scope, goal-directed, and is more likely to be characterised by technical dialogue or ‘monologue disguised as dialogue’. As Friedman explains:

The difference…is in the relationship itself. I-Thou is a relationship of openness, directness, mutuality, and presence…I-It, in contrast, is the typical subject-object relationship in which ones knows and uses other persons or things without allowing them to exist for oneself in their uniqueness (Friedman, 2002, loc.141).

If one’s relations with others are confined only to the sphere of the *I-It* then the other ‘I’ am in conversation with is seen only as a means to an end. Given that the ‘other’ is objectified in *I-It* relations, only technical dialogue or ‘monologue disguised as dialogue’ are accessible to the interlocutors. *I-Thou* relationships are more likely to be characterised by genuine dialogue given that the *I-Thou* is founded upon mutuality and openness to the other, both of which are necessary conditions for genuine dialogue to occur.

While there is a ‘fruitful and necessary alternation’ between the *I-Thou* and *I-It,* and we cannot be constantly engaged in *I-Thou* relationships (Friedman, 2002, loc.150). I argue that the directness of the *I-Thou* relationship makes it more amenable to conversations about ‘controversial topics’, and that genuine dialogue is the most appropriate form of dialogue in such cases, given that it necessitates an ‘experiencing [of] the other side’ of one’s relationship with the other (Buber, 1947/2002, loc.159).

The discussion of ‘controversial’ subjects on university campuses may only be productive, and educative, where academics are able to guide conversations away from mere polemic dismissal and/or dogmatic assertion. But it is essential that such conversations *do* still happen within HEIs. As Yale aptly explains, ‘to experience "intellectual growth and discovery" requires "the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable”’ (1975, as cited by Titus, 2011, p.164). Having now argued for the cultivation of *I-Thou* relationships and genuine dialogue between academics and students as a conduit to the discussion of ‘controversial’ topics, in the next section I will explore how such dialogue can be meaningfully cultivated in the HE classroom, drawing on *The Chair* as an exemplar for pedagogy.

**Cultivating genuine dialogue in Higher Education**

While it might seem rather idealistic to argue for *I-Thou* relations and genuine dialogue between academics and students, this form of dialogue is the most appropriate means of discussing difficult or ‘controversial’ topics, and the kind of openness and reciprocity which marks out *I-Thou* relationships are invaluable student attributes in Higher Education which institutions should focus on cultivating. Academics’ freedom to teach should be protected, as well as acknowledging students’ right to protest and engage in debate if they disagree with a particular perspective. My concern throughout this paper in relation to the specific examples discussed is that there seems to be a complete dearth of debate and dialogue on university campuses in the current political climate, with the first signs of disagreement often signalling an end to the conversation.

I have used *The Chair* (2021) to illustrate the connection between threats to academic freedom and the marketisation of HE. My references to *The Chair* also highlight the potential value of using film as a pedagogic tool for initiating difficult and/or ‘controversial’ discussions. Film and TV series can provide a relatively ‘neutral’ entry point into various debates (although the director’s intention should be considered), and introducing a ‘controversial’ topic in the HE classroom via a TV series or film could be more productive than if the academic were to draw on their own lived experience to inform the discussion.

Although using film and/or TV series as a heuristic tool to engage students in difficult debates does not constitute a ‘view from nowhere’, this medium can encourage more genuine staff-student dialogue as each viewer is able to engage in criticism as part of an ongoing conversation (Gibbs, 2019). As Gibbs discusses, the medium of film offers the audience different ‘pictures’ of education which enables a kind of ‘conceptual re-education’ (2019, p.91). Here, I wish to extend Gibbs’ argument to include TV series such as *The Chair*, and I argue that what may be required when discussing controversial topics is precisely an array of different ‘pictures’ that are representative of different worldviews. The use of film to introduce difficult issues is not only confined to undergraduate programmes in Education, of course, but there is also a growing reliance on film in the health sciences. ‘Cinemeducation’[[4]](#footnote-4) is used to scaffold the discussion of complex ethical dilemmas in areas such as end-of-life care (DiBartolo and Seldomridge, 2009). This shows that film can be used to explore difficult topics and debates in health care – when dealing with precisely those questions which cannot be easily resolved – and the potential use of film and TV series to traverse ‘controversial’ issues extends to other academic disciplines.

Academic freedom, and particularly the freedom to teach, is a right which needs to be staunchly defended. Threats to academic freedom not only affects academics’ autonomy and independence in curricular matters, but it could also constrain the breadth of the Higher Education that students receive. Rather than closing down the discussion of specific topics which could be considered difficult or controversial (such as National Socialism and Nazism, the legacy of the British Empire, and racial inequalities in academia at large), we need to encourage more open staff-student dialogue on precisely these issues. The question that remains is: if academics and students feel unable to discuss certain issues on university campuses, then where will these important conversations happen? I have used examples from *The Chair* to highlight what could happen when genuine dialogue – both between staff and students, and among colleagues – is noticeably absent at universities, as well as arguing that film and TV series could offer a constructive ‘way in’ to controversial discussions. The extent to which academic freedom is protected (or not) is symbolic of what kind of Higher Education is currently valued, and what values we wish to pass on to the next generation of students; genuine staff-student dialogue should be inextricable from any contemporary reimagining of the university.

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1. A recent example of staff-student discord and highly publicised student protests is in the case of Kathleen Stock at the University of Sussex. Stock came under fire for her philosophical views which were branded ‘transphobic’ by students. In her teaching and research, Stock discussed the distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, arguing that it is ‘sex’ rather than gender which determines ‘femalehood’ or ‘malehood’. After Stock’s personal safety was threatened and the protests became more heated, she resigned from the university. The Office for Students (OfS) is now set to investigate whether or not the university failed to fulfil their obligation to protect Stock’s academic ‘freedom of speech’. For further details, see: Adams (2021), Lambert (2021), and Thorburn (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The ‘Academic Freedom Index’ (AFi) is a quantitative measure of the level of *de facto* academic freedom experienced in different countries around the world. The AFi is calculated based on five indicators: ‘freedom to research and teach’, ‘freedom of academic exchange and dissemination’, ‘institutional autonomy’, ‘campus integrity’, and ‘freedom of academic and cultural expression’ (Kinzelbach *et al.*, 2021, p.8). Worryingly, the AFi scores for both the UK and USA have decreased between 2011 and 2021. For a more detailed analysis of the shifting landscape of academic freedom on a global scale, see: Kinzelbach *et al.* (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Byron explains the emergence of ‘safe spaces’ as follows: ‘Safe spaces find their roots in feminist consciousness-raising efforts of the 1960s and 1970s. These separatist spaces were meant to provide women with opportunities to discuss issues that affected them with other women’ (2017, p.118).

‘Trigger warnings’ are integral to the creation of ‘safe spaces’; essentially, these warnings involve directly highlighting if any sensitive or ‘traumatic’ issues (such as domestic violence, sexual assault, or self-harm) are discussed in a particular book, film, or set of images. These warnings then enable people, in this case students, to make an informed choice to engage with the material or not, and if so, that they might need to approach it with greater care. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Cinemeducation’ is broadly defined as ‘the use of movie clips or whole movies to help educate medical students and residents on the biopsychosocialspiritual aspects of health care’ (Alexander *et al*., 2006, p.1). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)